

JACK LONDON: AMERICAN POLITICAL PARADOX

by

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CHAPTER I

Political Science and Political Fiction

Defense Of Fiction

What is politics? Men still speculate over this age-old question, despite contemporary efforts to reduce the answer to quantitative terms. Differences in methodology aside, most political scientists would agree that politics has something to do with social power, and that this phenomenon is somehow different from that physical force which is the subject matter of contemporary physics. Harold Lasswell's view that politics is the study of "who gets what, when, and how"¹ is also widely accepted, although political scientists would probably disagree as to what the term means. However, if we can agree that politics is the study of social power--of gaining, holding, resisting, or in the anarchist or nihilist sense, destroying it² --then politics touches on every instance of man's interaction in society. Any expression, reaction, or explanation of power on the human condition can be considered implicitly political.

How are we to study these phenomena of social power? Shall history, mathematics, philosophy, physics, psychology, or whatever, provide the key? Claims to the authenticity of these

¹Harold D. Lasswell, The Political Writings of Harold D. Lasswell (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1951), 287.

²"Politics or Commitment?" The Times Literary Supplement, 3, 105 (September 1, 1961), 580.

and other methods are familiar, if not altogether convincing. Perhaps, in the absence of Truth, political scientists must satisfy themselves that the nature of their subject matter has predetermined a failure to attain complete and encompassing answers. But, whatever the methodology, political scientists still seek insights into the nature of political man. And, it is in terms of expressing and explaining him that political fiction of the past and present provides insight.

At the outset, it must be admitted that political fiction cannot be studied by classical scientific analysis. An approach based on the collection and presentation of statistically analyzed data to prove a proposed hypothesis is difficult, if not ludicrous, when applied to this subject matter. If, then, it is difficult to demonstrate a relationship between politics and fiction by scientific technique, is fiction a valid subject for political investigation? The answer is obvious when one considers that, as in any study of the abstruse characteristics of men and ideas, more than enough subjectively interpreted data can be compiled to justify an inquiry. A loyalty to political science as a discipline in no way automatically excludes an investigation of the relationship between politics and fiction, even if that investigation is made on subjective terms.

While nearly everyone has some interest in fiction as an art form, the study of fiction in terms of political science may seem less valid. But political fiction is of prime significance to political science because of the role it plays in the communication of ideas. Thus, when fiction expresses a political concept,

it must be considered a form of political fiction and a subject for study by political scientists. This does not imply that the writers of fiction--short stories, novels, plays or poems--have political insights. It does assert that they provide a field of communication which is of value to political scientists.

Admittedly, not all works of fiction that deal with political ideas and institutions are of equal value to political scientists. The investigator must exercise the prerogative to pick and choose among a wide selection of available fiction. In selecting and evaluating fiction, political scientists acknowledge the literary standard of plausibility.³ Stylistically, the author must project the various political concepts within a relatively acceptable framework of fiction as a work of art. Otherwise, the attempt on the part of the author to depict life is lost, and fiction as a means of expression is seriously impaired.

The involvement of fiction writers in the expression of political ideas repeatedly manifests itself in any investigation of modern literature. For example, fiction has been one of the most important methods for expressing the plight of the American Negro. While a thorough investigation of this political phenomenon would have to include the abolitionist fiction of the pre-Civil War era,⁴ it will suffice here to mention examples from the

³James F. Davidson, "Political Science and Political Fiction," American Political Science Review, 55 (December, 1961), 859.

⁴The classic example is Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin, published in 1852.

twentieth century.

During the first half of this century, when most Americans refused to recognize the Negro problem, William Faulkner prophetically incorporated in his fiction a complete picture of the political alienation of Southern Negroes. In a manner difficult to equal in either textbooks or lectures, the Faulkner short story, "Dry September,"⁵ compels the reader to come to grips with the tragedy of Southern justice. The greatest part of Faulkner's literary efforts was the construction of a fictional society--Yoknapatowpha County--in which he incorporated all vital political, economic, and social implications and repercussions.⁶ It was within this fictional framework that he examined the political suppression of the Negro minority.

In the past decade, the fiction of James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, and LeRoi Jones,⁷ among others, has brought home to White America the frustrations of Negroes' efforts to secure equality and the militant urgency of their demands. In somewhat the same sense as Faulkner, Baldwin and Ellison deal with the social conditions of American Negroes. The disillusionment

⁵William Faulkner, Collected Stories of William Faulkner (New York: Random House, Inc., 1948), 169-183.

⁶Faulkner's construction of this fictional society--Yoknapatowpha County--was the result of most of his literary effort. The most significant examples can be noted in such short stories as "Red Leaves" and "A Justice" and in such novels as Sartoris, The Sound and the Fury, The Unvanquished, and The Hamlet.

⁷See James Baldwin's Nobody Knows My Name, published in 1962, and Another Country, published in 1963; Ralph Ellison's The Invisible Man, published in 1953; and LeRoi Jones' The System of Dante's Hell, published in 1965.

reflected in Jones' fiction seems to refute the whole American political system and to seek a solution in the murky environs of nihilism.

This discussion of Faulkner and several contemporary Negro authors serves simply to illustrate the value of fiction in the communication of political concepts. Thus, fiction can be studied as one of the methods for the expression of conceptual relationships between political ideas and human experiences. Committees, task forces, and scientific researchers may illuminate the obvious, but creative writers are still the more accurate recorders of life.

Jack London and Political Fiction

The purpose of this paper is twofold. In the first place, it is intended to demonstrate the validity of fiction as an area of study within the discipline of political science. Secondly, it is an evaluation of the life and literary works of Jack London. An analysis of London's fiction reveals a number of valuable insights into the American political mind of the early twentieth century.

Such an evaluation of political fiction involves two major considerations. The first is a thorough examination of the writer's life, his political commitment, and his social environment. Then, the investigator may embark on a comprehensive analysis of one or more of the author's fictional works. The particular methodology employed by political scientists in analyzing political fiction will be determined by the works involved and the objectives of the study. Jack London provides an especially interesting subject for an investigation of political fiction. During his life he was

exceptionally active in the arena of practical politics and professed a high degree of political commitment. Moreover, he produced a vast amount of fiction, all of which is heavily infused with political ideas. London preached the gospel of revolutionary socialism, but several recurrent themes in his fiction reveal concepts totally alien to socialist doctrine. Thus, the man and his fiction present a paradox which seems highly representative of American society at the turn of the century.

In the development of this thesis, a large degree of consideration has been given to an investigation of London's life. As with any author, London was able only to write that which he knew and understood. He was a man who rose from the most humble beginnings to the heights of fame and material rewards. His was, in fact, one of the great success stories of American history. Partly as a result of his poverty stricken youth, he had a real compassion for the American working class. However, his greatest source of pride was his own struggle up the social ladder. Thus, he saw all life as the struggle which he himself had experienced.

London's political commitment offers a difficult dilemma. As mentioned, he was, during his lifetime, widely regarded as one of the leaders of the socialist movement in America. He devoted great amounts of time, energy, and money to the cause. From his late teens to the very end of his life, he publicly professed his support for the inevitable socialist society.

There are, however, a number of notable characteristics (or recurrent themes) in his fiction which strikingly conflict with his avowed socialism. The most constant theme in London's

fiction is that of extreme individualism which is often manifested in pure narcissism. London consistently personalized this ethic of individualism into a high degree of compatibility with Spencer's Social Darwinism. In dramatizing his major characters--most are semi-autobiographical--he evolved a sort of New World Nietzschean superman, infected with the zeal of imperialism, and tainted by the blight of racism. While promoting the idea of American assertiveness, London's fiction worshiped violence and glorified brutality to the end of subduing the inferior peoples and races of the world.

To provide a detailed analysis of London's fiction, this paper includes a comparative study of three major novels--The Sea Wolf, The Iron Heel, and Martin Eden. London claimed that each of these works was devoted to promoting the socialist cause. The conclusions reached in this investigation indicate quite the opposite.

Finally, London's fiction is evaluated in relation to American society during his lifetime. The conclusion of this paper suggests that the author's works are highly representative of American political thinking at the beginning of this century. Like London's fiction, American society gave tacit concern to social reform. Its energy and enthusiasm, however, were directed toward a new aggressiveness in world politics. In pursuit of new frontiers to conquer, the United States was a nation becoming aware of power such as the world had never before known. It seems, then, that Jack London was influenced by his environment, and in turn, he influenced his vast reading public by reinforcing its

basic nationalistic preconceptions. Today, his fiction provides those valuable insights into the political thinking of a by-gone era available only in the recreation of life through the medium of fiction.

Political Fiction: Limitations and Potential

The study of political fiction has certain limitations which must be recognized at the outset of any content analysis. Certainly, an investigation of political fiction could not be considered an autonomous area within the discipline of political science. While it is one method of approach for analyzing and evaluating the nature of political man, any meaningful conclusions must be reached within the context of philosophical and behavioral political science. Fiction must be considered important as a means of articulation and as a source of political ideas, but only in dealing with concepts made familiar by previous work in political research. The evaluation of a political idea in a work of fiction would not be meaningful without the investigator first having an understanding of the philosophical basis and historical context which made the idea valid.

Political fiction does, however, offer political scientists a totally unique area of investigation. It provides microcosmic re-creations of complete political relationships. These fictional worlds are inhabited by politically motivated characters who, in turn, demonstrate a vital concern with the institutions of political power. It is the analysis and evaluation of these fictional characters oscillating around viable political concepts which justifies the study of political fiction. The study of

political fiction must be considered a vital tool to political scientists in augmenting their understanding of the whole of their discipline.

The subject is politics and the end is communicable understanding. The means ought to be any that contribute. There is a great need for experience, insight, and correlation, wherever they are available. Political fiction is one source. It "illuminates politics as it illuminates all of life: by imposing an order sufficient to give meaning and flexible enough to impart the sense of vital confusion."⁸

⁸ Davidson, 860.

CHAPTER II

The Making of a Writer

Jack London In Perspective

The importance of Jack London defies precise evaluation. He lived and accomplished so much that his life and work offer unlimited sources for study. But more than anything else, Jack London was a child of his times. Born in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, he lived through and vigorously tasted the first decade and a half of the twentieth century. In his life, his writings, and his thinking, the whole panorama of emerging America is revealed--poverty, social reform, social Darwinism, ethnic pride, imperialism, and even racism. Contrasting as these factors are, they are all found in his life and work.

Jack London's life was his greatest story. He lived only forty years, but they were intensively productive. He was a writer by desire, not by discipline. What he lacked in formal education he made up for with enthusiasm. He lived the Horatio Alger dream, but he preached the proletariat revolution. By his thirtieth birthday, he was the most widely read author in the United States,⁹ but just ten years later took his own life in bitter frustration.

As a writer he was no less complex than as a man. His

⁹Philip S. Foner, Jack London: American Rebel (New York: The Citadel Press, 1947), 7.

literary efforts were constantly burdened by his tendency to over-write. His verbosity accepted, London's romantic approach to life captured a vast reading public. His work was exciting. More significantly, the brutal realism of his style broke the ground for new realms of literary protest.

In writing about the working class, London radically departed from the trend of his times. He rejected the concept of Christian charity for the less fortunate and couched his criticism in terms of exploitation, bread, and revolution. He was not a great political thinker, but he was well enough informed to see the working relationship between the needs of his day and the promise of Marxist Socialism. Though never a very convincing socialist himself, his writings did more to spread the ideas of socialism in the United States than those of any other American author.¹⁰

The events of London's life offer obvious proof of his enormous energy. Yet, there are recurring examples of his inability to see things through to a happy conclusion. This is true in his fiction as well as his life. Capable as he was, whenever responsibilities became too great he would tear off on an adventure. The conflicts in London's life were evidenced in his fiction. In order to understand the man who worshipped Marx, Darwin, Spencer, and Nietzsche without any inhibitions of contradiction, it is first necessary to understand his motivations. For the sake of brevity, the following biography touches on only

¹⁰ Donald D. Eghert and Stow Persons (ed.), Socialism and American Life (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1952), I, 603.

the significant events of his life.¹¹

The Childhood of Jack London, 1876-1891

The early life of Jack London is well documented. His family was never financially secure; in his later life, however, his memories of a deprived childhood were probably somewhat exaggerated. He had, throughout his life, a ravenous appetite for meat. As an adult, he attributed this to the constant hunger that he had experienced as a child.¹²

The parentage of London is one of the prime factors in understanding his paradoxical nature. His mother was Flora Wellman, a rebel from a middle-class Ohio family.¹³ A temperamental and domineering woman, she was throughout most of her life a working spiritualist. London's father remains somewhat of a mystery. It is generally presumed, however, that he was "Professor" W. H. Chaney, a practicing astrologer, intellectual, and relatively successful charlatan.¹⁴ There remains a shadow of uncertainty because Chaney persistently denied having fathered

¹¹For biographical information in this chapter I have relied largely upon: Charmian London, The Book of Jack London, 2 vols.; Irving Stone, A Sailor on Horseback; Joan London, Jack London and His Times; and Richard O'Connor, Jack London: a Biography. These four works are hereafter cited only to clarify points of particular interest.

¹²Richard O'Connor, Jack London: a Biography (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1964), 41.

¹³Irving Stone, A Sailor on Horseback (Cambridge, Mass.: The Riverside Press, 1938), 12.

¹⁴O'Connor, 11.

London. Jack London was given a name after his mother married John London, a man of several talents but little ambition. The wedding was on September 7, 1876, eight months after Jack London had been born.¹⁵

Jack London's early life has been repeatedly characterized by his mother's lack of affection for him. He seems to have been starved for love. His stepfather was a hard-working man, but never a good provider. What money John London made above basic needs was usually lost by Flora on bad investments--tips she received from the spirit world. As a small boy, London was often pressed into service by his mother at the seances she held for fellow spiritualists. These repeated confrontations with spirits seem to have made the child extremely nervous and irritable.

At a very early age, probably six years old, he became a rapacious reader. His earliest recollections include Horatio Alger's From Canal Boy to President and Washington Irving's Alhambra, neither being the most logical education for a future socialist.¹⁶ Another significant event at this stage of London's development was the discovery of his own illegitimacy. He claimed to have overheard a quarrel between his mother and John London which revealed to him the circumstances of his birth.

By the time London was ten years old, he had discovered the Oakland Public Library. It was a discovery which offered him

¹⁵Stone, 14.

¹⁶Charmian London, The Book of Jack London (2vols.; New York: The Century Company, 1921), I, 47.

solace from his poverty-stricken youth. He was first attracted to books about history and adventure, but soon began to read the novels of Flaubert, Melville, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky. By the time he was thirteen he was as well versed in literature as many college graduates.¹⁷

London's efforts to help support his family began early in his life. At age eleven he was carrying morning and evening paper routes. At thirteen he finished grade school and began working full-time to help feed the family. He did, however, manage to save back enough money to buy an old skiff and learn to sail it on San Francisco Bay. By the time he was fifteen he was working ten to sixteen hours a day in a waterfront cannery at a wage of ten cents an hour. He began to notice the terrible hopelessness of his fellow workers and feared that he too would soon become a "work beast".¹⁸

The Formative Years: The Sea, The Road, The Klondike, 1891-1898

The life of a cannery worker soon drove London to look for something better. He quit the cannery, turned to the open waters of San Francisco Bay, and decided to become an oyster pirate. He borrowed three hundred dollars and made a down payment on the sloop "Razzle Dazzle," even inheriting the mistress of the former pirate-captain.¹⁹ Thus, at only fifteen, London was living a great adventure as a pirate prince in a world of men. He soon

¹⁷O'Connor, 39.

¹⁸Ibid., 43.

¹⁹Charmian London, I, 79.

developed a taste for big spending and hard drinking, traits which followed him to the grave. The pirate life ended after a particularly long drunk when he almost drowned. He saw it as a sign to give up the life of crime. His subsequent search for honest work took him to the other side of the law as a deputy patroiman for the Fish Patrol.

During his adventures on San Francisco Bay, the young adventurer developed an appetite for the sea. In the winter of 1892, shortly after his seventeenth birthday, London signed on the eighty-ton schooner "Sophie Sutherland" bound for seal-hunting waters north of Japan.²⁰ The eight month voyage was one of his greatest adventures and furnished him with some of his richest experiences. He pitted his youth and strength against the angry sea and the tough men of the sealing fleet and returned with the confidence of having conquered both.

Upon returning to San Francisco, London found economic conditions even more depressed than when he had left. He was soon forced back into the starvation wages of the labor market, working for ten cents an hour in a jute mill. It was while working twelve-hour days in this mill that he scored his first literary success. He won a twenty-five dollar prize in a short story contest held by a San Francisco newspaper. The descriptive article concerned one of his experiences while sailing on the "Sophie Sutherland" and was entitled "Typhoon off the Coast of Japan."²¹

²⁰Ibid., 109.

²¹Stone, 47.

This minor literary success ignited a latent spark in his mind which told him he should do something better with his life. The idea kept recurring to him that he had earned as much with this short article as he did by working two hundred and fifty hours on the labor market.²² His thoughts began to turn to writing as a vocation. He left the jute mill and went to work in an electrical plant in hopes of rising to the top of that new industry. His first job was at the very bottom--a coalpasser, the most back-breaking job imaginable. He soon became disillusioned with the Horatio Alger approach because the work was so hard and the results so slow. This was the last time, London decided, that he would prostitute himself to the labor market for any reason other than to sustain his writing.

By the spring of 1894, Jack London had left the electrical plant, undecided as to what path to follow. Out of work, the dependence of his family became unbearable and he once again sought escape in adventure. This time it was the widely publicized march on Washington by the "Industrial Army" of Jacob S. Coxey. Besides the pure romantic-attraction of the cross country trip, London sympathized with the protest against unemployment and slave wages. He eagerly joined the ranks of that segment of the "Industrial Army" which left from San Francisco.²³

The whole march on the capitol was a travesty of miscalculation, disillusionment, and hardship. The ranks of the "Industrial

²²Ruth Franchere, Jack London: the Pursuit of a Dream (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1962), 40.

²³Charmian London, I, 150.

"Army" gradually dwindled as it moved eastward. Jack London was one of those who broke off to travel alone. The trip was invaluable to the impressionable London because it introduced him to the life of the tramp. It also brought him into intimate contact with many of the radical socialists who frequented the hobo jungles. It was in one of these hobo jungles that he first acquired a copy of the Communist Manifesto. This was one of the principal steps in his progress toward Marxist Socialism.

Traveling alone, London bummed across the country to the east coast. He stayed several weeks in New York City and became acquainted with the gutter-life of metropolitan society. After leaving New York, he was arrested in Niagara Falls for vagrancy and was sentenced to thirty days at hard labor.²⁴ While serving his sentence he learned first hand the brutality to which the less-fortunate in society are subjected. This experience probably explains his lifelong distaste for Authority.

By the summer of 1895, London was back in Oakland with Flora and the family. At this stage of his life, he came under the influence of two conflicting motivations. He still believed the Horatio Alger concept of eventual success as the result of his own tenacity. However, he had also become thoroughly enamored with the revolutionary socialism of Karl Marx. He saw himself as one of the suppressed masses, but foresaw his rise out of the masses through the success of a literary career. It became clear to London that in order to be a successful writer he would have

²⁴Ibid., 181.

to continue his education.

In the fall of 1895, Jack London enrolled as a freshman at the Oakland high School. This nineteen year old proletarian and world-traveller must have presented a rather comic, yet frightening appearance to his more respectable classmates. He worked hard, did some creative writing for the school magazine, but at the end of the first year decided that his education was progressing too slowly.

It was during this year of high school that London began attending socialist meetings in the Bay area. Soon he became one of the most eloquent advocates of the local socialist movement. He became rather widely known as the "boy socialist of Oakland."²⁵ He seems to have reveled in the publicity which came to him as a result of his socialist activities.

As if being a high school freshman and a "boy socialist" weren't enough, Jack London became acquainted with and soon enamored of Mabel Applegarth. She was three years his senior, a student at the University of California, and a model of middle class respectability. Mabel Applegarth was so deeply entrenched in the values of the upper-middle class that she seemed the polar extreme from the "boy socialist." In any case, London was terribly attracted to her and to the cultural and spiritual refinement which she represented. This was an all-but-forbidden love and the sheer desperation of his desire gave new direction to his ambitions. It was with great determination that he began to look

onward and upward toward wealth and respectability.²⁶

After completing one year of high school, London felt that his education must proceed more quickly. He decided to spend the summer cramming for the University of California entrance examinations. He worked harder than he had ever thought possible and in late August passed the exam. Several weeks later he enrolled at Berkeley. He was as much a misfit on the university scene as he had been in high school. He found little in common with his fellow students, the majority of whom were of the bourgeoisie. This academic environment, however, failed to stimulate him. Again in the throes of disillusionment, he left the university after one semester.

He still regarded success as the key to gaining the hand of Mabel Applegarth. It was the spring of 1897, and the madness of the Yukon gold rush was sweeping the country. For Jack London, it was the answer to all his problems. With the greatest haste, he sailed from San Francisco for the promised land of the Klondike.²⁷ The rugged life and constant adventure in the North greatly excited the young romantic. He apparently never got around to seriously seeking gold. He did, however, spend more than a year soaking up material which was eventually to return his investment a thousand times over when translated to the printed page.

The Taste of Success, 1898-1903

In the summer of 1898, Jack London returned to San Francisco

²⁶ Maxwell Geismar, Rebels and Ancestors: the American Novel 1890-1915 (Cambridge, Mass.: The Riverside Press, 1953), 177.

²⁷ Stone, 85.

from the North. He was penniless and had to face his family in their usual state of destitution. This time, however, he refused to return to the slave-wages of the capitalist system. He was determined to sell his thoughts, to become a "brain merchant" as he called it. He decided to become a professional writer. In order to achieve his goal, London developed a rather professional approach. He began turning out articles and short stories aimed at the consumer market. Though writing constantly, he worked at odd jobs and pawned nearly everything he owned in order to support himself and the family. His financial condition grew constantly worse, but he continued to write a great amount of material, circulating and re-circulating it to the potential magazine market. Though repeatedly frustrated, he turned down a comfortable life as a postman in order to pursue his goal in the literary world.

Just as London reached the depths of depression over his failure to sell his "brain merchandise", he had two articles accepted on the same day. In late November of 1898, the Overland Monthly notified him that it was accepting one of his short stories, "To the Man on Trail".²⁸ His elation was short-lived, however, because the magazine offered him only five dollars. This was no better pay than he had been receiving in a cannery. Later that same day he was notified by the Black Cat Magazine that it would pay forty dollars for a horror story.²⁹ For the struggling writer, this was the taste of honey. It was the boost he needed, for it carried him through the hard days which lay ahead.

²⁸ O'Connor, 114.

²⁹ Ibid.

Slowly, London's stories were accepted by more magazines. His newly-found success induced him to ask for Mabel Applegarth's hand in marriage. Though she was willing, the complications of her family involvement made the relationship impossible. The love affair began to cool and soon London was rarely seen at the Applegarth home.

During the early months of 1900, Jack London began to direct his interest toward one of Miss Applegarth's friends, Bess Maddern. She was from a family of the same economic and social class as the Applegarth's, but was very different from Mabel. Bess Maddern was a strong and handsome woman whose character seemed to exude a quality of calmness and practicality. In short, she was the kind of woman London wanted as the mother of his sons. They did not have a violent love affair. Their relationship was characterized by mutual admiration and respect. The courtship was brief--they were married on April 7, 1900.³⁰

Very shortly after the marriage, Son of the Wolf, London's first book was published. This collection of short stories about the frozen North was met with instantaneous critical success. London was overjoyed, and adding to his exuberance was Bess' announcement that she was pregnant. He was obsessed with the idea of having a son to carry on his name and tradition. He saw himself and Bess as creating a new and better strain of men. The first child, a daughter, was born on January 15, 1901.³¹ London was crushed. The birth of a second daughter two years later was

³⁰Franchere, 234.

³¹O'Connor, 145.

even more difficult for him to accept. He began to doubt Bess's ability to bear a son--one of the prime factors for their eventual separation.

London's literary career sputtered as his first novel, A Daughter of the Snows, published in 1902, was not well received by the critics. In the San Francisco area, London was becoming known as a drinker and carouser, as well as a rising star in the literary world. He became notorious for his abilities with both bottle and women. He was obsessed with masculinity, and next only to producing a male heir, saw his abilities with women and the bottle as signs of his own manliness.

By the summer of 1902, London was off on another adventure. This time it was to write a series of articles for the Boer War in South Africa. Upon arriving in England, he was informed that the offer had been cancelled. Though short of money, he stayed on in London for several weeks, gathering material for The People of the Abyss, a book-length exposé about the horrid conditions in the capitol of the world's wealthiest empire.

The Wolf at the Top, 1903-1909

Back from England, London began work on a short story about a domestic dog confronted with the struggle for survival in the sub-Arctic wilderness. It was intended to be a story of about four or five thousand words, but as London's imagination began to race across the Arctic wilds, the tale became a thirty-two thousand word novel. It was, of course, The Call of the Wild, and Buck, the California dog, became the super-dog of the North.

The theme of The Call of the Wild is the transformation of Buck from domestic dog to primordial beast. It is a return to the instinctive savagery of the wild. In the end, Buck becomes more wolf than dog, yet more powerful, intelligent, and resourceful than the wolves themselves. It seems quite possible that London, who liked to be called "Wolf" by his friends, wrote about Buck as he saw himself.³² He wanted to be the fiercest of the fierce, the strongest of the strong.

The Call of the Wild marked the apex of Jack London's literary career. All the force and natural beauty of his style crystallized in the story of Buck. The whole novel was a sustained effort of literary perfection. He was never again able to achieve such a high degree of sophistication throughout any of his longer works.

London sold outright the American publishing rights on The Call of the Wild to the Macmillan Company for only two thousand dollars. Upon publication, it met instantaneous success with critics and the reading public. It rocketed London to the top of the American literary scene and assured the sale of nearly everything he would subsequently turn out. As of 1964, The Call of the Wild had sold well over two million hardcover copies in United States alone.³³ Within two years after its publication in 1903, the story of Buck had been translated into every major language in the world and had made its author world famous.

³²Alfred Kazin, On Native Grounds (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday and Company, 1956), 85.

³³O'Connor, 176.

By late 1903, London had become disenchanted with the domestic nature of his wife Bess and her apparent inability to bear a son. It was at this point that Miss Charmian Kittredge entered his life. Charmian was not an attractive woman, but she was as thoroughly uninhibited and adventuresome as London himself. She was an exciting person--the exact opposite of Bess London. After a short but torrid romance, London announced that he was separating from his wife.

After leaving the home he had made for his wife and family, London immediately set to work on a new novel. It was the product of his experiences at sea and was to reveal his concept of the Nietzschean superman. The novel was The Sea Wolf, published in 1904. The first half of the novel, which deals with the character of Wolf Larsen, is as tough and dramatic as any fiction he wrote. The second half, however, turns into a travesty of sentimentality. Nevertheless, it was a great success, though selling only about one-fourth as many copies as The Call of the Wild.³⁴ The Sea Wolf is one of the most significant of London's novels.³⁵

Early in 1904, London accepted an offer from the Hearst publications to cover the Russo-Japanese War. His wanderings in Japan and Korea seemed to reinforce his preconception of a threat to the white race by the "Yellow Peril" of Asia.³⁶ His lack of diplomacy with the Asians deterred most of his attempts to report the war. He soon became discouraged with his work and returned

³⁴ Ibid., 198.

³⁵ The Sea Wolf is discussed in detail in Chapter V.

³⁶ Joan London, Jack London and His Times (Garden City, N. Y.: Country Life Press, 1939), 285.

to California in mid-summer 1904.

Upon his return he resumed his relationship with Charmian Kittredge. He continued to hack out vast amounts of material--mainly short stories and descriptive articles. London was constantly in debt, but in 1905, he began buying ranch land in the Sonoma Valley, north of San Francisco Bay. This was the beginning of what was to become his large estate. Later that year he was divorced by Bess London and immediately married to Charmian Kittredge.³⁷

By the summer of 1906, London was writing The Iron Heel. Though this pseudo-novel was never a financial success, it is one of his most significant works. Its impact on twentieth century revolutionaries has been profound. It has been called both a call to arms for the socialist revolution and a blueprint for fascism.³⁸ Revolutionary novel that it is, it reveals many of London's political idiosyncracies.³⁹

The old restlessness soon began to stir. This time it was the spring of 1907, and he had decided to make a seven year voyage around the world. Charmian would accompany him and the trip was to be made in a boat designed by London himself. The whole trip turned out to be a disastrous mis-adventure which sapped him of physical and financial resources. After a year and a half in the unseaworthy craft and six months of semi-invalidism in Australia, the Londons returned to California. A tremendous amount

³⁷Charmian London, 85.

³⁸Geismar, 168.

³⁹The Iron Heel is discussed in detail in Chapter V.

of fiction resulted from the trip, but the autobiographical novel, Martin Eden, was by far the most significant. It was published in 1909, and received a disappointing critical reception. It was a relative financial success, but its significance lies in its portrayal of London's self-analysis.⁴⁰

The Last Phase: a Rapid Deterioration, 1909-1916

The last seven years of Jack London's life can be characterized as those of a man who had fulfilled his mission and was awaiting death. He turned out a vast amount of literary material, but repeatedly found that he no longer had anything to say. His ranch began to completely dominate his attention. He produced volumes of material which his publisher, the Macmillan Company, and a variety of magazines dutifully published. Every cent he made from his writing went into the maintenance of the ranch and support of his dependents. His life became one of increasing debauchery from drinking and from gorging himself on half-cooked meat.

Few of the short stories from this last period captured his old strength and enthusiasm.⁴¹ London's only widely read novel from this period was John Barleycorn, published in 1913. It was a semi-autobiographical tirade against the evils of alcohol. While John Barleycorn became the bible of the Temperance Movement, its author never took a word of it to heart.

⁴⁰ Martin Eden is discussed in detail in Chapter V.

⁴¹ The best example is "The Mexican", collected in The Night Born, 1913.

By 1911, London's ranch holdings exceeded 1,000 acres. He became obsessed with various schemes to turn his land into a profit-making venture. Success always eluded him, however, and his investments constantly sapped his literary earnings. The one incident in this period which sparked the old London enthusiasm was the knowledge in the summer of 1911 that Charmian was pregnant. Jack London yearned for a male heir to carry on his ranch. This fresh motivation turned to bitter disappointment when on June 19, 1911 Charmian gave birth to a daughter. In a fury born of frustration, London immediately went on a drunk and ended up in jail. The child died three days after her birth. The failure of Charmian to provide a male heir created a breach in their relationship which was never to heal.

Jack London himself called the last seven years of his life the "long sickness".⁴² Certainly he was sick with his frustrated attempts to produce a male heir and with his inability to turn out satisfactory fiction. Furthermore, he began to deteriorate physically from his drinking and eating habits. He became overweight and his digestive system all but ceased to function. Ignoring the advice of doctors, he continued to stuff himself with raw meat and to drink vast amounts of liquor. His overindulgence became a manifestation of self-destruction. He had contemplated suicide several times throughout his life, but as his physical condition worsened, his thoughts on suicide increased.

Out of frustration with his life, London struck out in various directions in search of his old zeal for life. He spent

several months of 1912 carousing in New York. In 1914, his disillusionment increased after a first-hand view of the Mexican Revolution which he had previously romanticized. He spent most of 1915 living in Hawaii. Always, though he returned to his squiredom in the Sonoma Valley.

Of all Jack London's disappointments during these last years, the killing blow probably was the destruction of the Wolf House. This mansion had required more than four years to build and an investment of over eighty thousand dollars. It was to have been the shrine of Jack London's self-immortalization, the finest house on the west coast. The night of its completion it burned to the ground. It was obviously a case of arson, but the culprit was never discovered. The Wolf House was London's last real dream and it went up in smoke before his very eyes. The "Wolf"--Jack London--was dead spiritually, if not physically.

London's ideas on socialism had always been rather unorthodox, but by the closing years of his life the contradictions became intolerable. Finally on March 7, 1915, he wrote a letter to the local Socialist Party chapter resigning his membership.⁴³ He charged that the Party was no longer revolutionary in nature and had betrayed the ideals to which he still held true. It seems obvious, though, that he was trying to placate his own guilt feelings toward the socialist cause. Furthermore, he was angry at the Socialist Party position against American intervention in the war in Europe. From the very opening of hostilities, London had violently called for the United States entry on the side of the Allies.

⁴³King Hendricks and Irving Shepard (ed.), Letters from Jack London (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1965), 446.

Jack London's final days were racked with illness and disgust. His inability to produce a male heir, his dissatisfaction with his writing, the loss of the Wolf House, and his physical impotency and degeneration conspired to drive him toward the final act. His last years had been increasingly unhappy as he moved ever further from his romantic self-illusion of physical and intellectual superiority.

Though the death throes had been more than six years in coming, the final act was conceived hastily. In the true London style, his decision was spontaneous. On November 21, 1916, London dined on half-raw ducks and consumed the usual amount of liquor. After retiring to his room for the evening he became violently ill. Instead of calling for help he decided that he had suffered enough--both in body and spirit. He took a lethal dose of morphine, went into a coma, and died within twenty hours.⁴⁴ Charmian suppressed the facts surrounding London's death. It was not until the publication of Irving Stone's Sailor on Horseback in 1938, that the suicide was publicly revealed. For all the excitement Jack London had known, his last hours were very quiet. But he died as he had lived--by his own will.

⁴⁴Stone, 33.

CHAPTER III

The Political Commitment

Hodgepodge Socialist Philosophy

(Socialism) is no longer a question of dialectics, theories, and dreams. There is no question about it. The revolution is a fact. It is here now. . .Seven million men of the working-class say that they are going to get the rest of the working-class to join with them and take the management away. The revolution is here, now. Stop it who can.⁴⁵

In just such words, Jack London continually reasserted his belief in the socialist cause and the imminence of the socialist revolution. By his own word, London was the most loyal member the cause could have. His actions and his literary efforts indicate something different. This chapter will elaborate the socialist doctrines to which he adhered and the efforts he made to bring about the revolution.

The early years of London's life probably account for the fact that he saw himself as a revolutionist. As noted in the preceding chapter he had experienced at first hand the hunger-pangs of the under-privileged and the frustrations of the industrial wage slaves. Seriously in need of far-reaching reforms, the United States became fertile soil for the radicals who clamored the doctrine of class-struggle. It was that period of American history dominated by the clash between the reform forces--Socialists, Populists, and Laborites--on the one hand

⁴⁵Jack London, "Revolution", Contemporary Review, 93 (January, 1908), 31.

and the status quo forces--Republicans, and conservative Democrats--on the other.

In the year 1894, Jack London was eighteen years old and totally frustrated by the futility of the labor market. The appeal of Jacob S. Coxey, the originator of the workers' march on Washington, made sense to London. Coxey called for direct government intervention in business on behalf of thousands of unemployed Americans. When Charles T. Kelly organized a march of "commonwealers" from San Francisco, London was eager to go. This was his introduction into the active socialist movement.⁴⁶

Though the march was a failure and London's efforts to take part in an organized movement were even more unsuccessful, life on the road put him into contact with new ideas of the time. On box cars and in hobo jungles he listened to the ragged philosophers.⁴⁷ They told and re-told the stories of the class-struggle, the exploitation of the working-class by the capitalists, the misery and degradation of the submerged one-tenth at the bottom of the social pit, and the inevitable violent clash which would put the workers in control of their own destinies. The idea of revolution especially appealed to London. He thrilled at the prospect of simultaneous movements throughout the world which would engage in the struggle to overthrow the present economic system and usher in a new society where the products of man's labor would be used for the benefit of all.

London gradually became aware that the roots for this new

⁴⁶Jack London, "How I Became a Socialist," (ed.) Philip S. Foner, Jack London: American Rebel (New York: the Citadel Press, 1947), 364.

⁴⁷Ibid.

social system sprang directly from the writings of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Sometime during his travels in 1894, he obtained a copy of The Communist Manifesto, which was to provide him with the basis of his socialist thinking throughout the rest of his life.⁴⁸ From this revolutionary pamphlet London found that his own experiences in the class struggle were no accident. He learned that all history had been a conflict between opposing forces and that he lived in the era of the final conflict. The part of The Communist Manifesto which most excited Jack London was the powerful battlecry:

The socialists disdain to conceal their aims and views. They openly declare their ends can be attained only by a forcible overthrow of all existing conditions. Let the ruling class tremble at the socialistic revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to gain. Working men of all countries, unite!⁴⁹

It was from these words that London shaped his own version of socialism. In one form or another, he repeated this passage from The Communist Manifesto in street-corner speeches, formal addresses before the respectable bourgeoisie, in revolutionary essays, in short stories and in novels. He was never able to justify any concept of socialism which stopped short of revolution.

From his first introduction to socialism in 1894, London gradually expanded the basis for his beliefs. Though he claimed to have read widely from the works of such eminent thinkers as

⁴⁸O'Connor, 67.

⁴⁹Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, The Communist Manifesto, (ed.) Arthur P. Mendel, Essential Works of Marxism (New York: Bantam Books, 1961), 44.

Thomas Huxley, Adam Smith, Ricardo, John Stuart Mill, Hobbes, Locke, Hume, Hegel, Kant, and Berkeley, the main force of his ideas were based on Darwin, Spencer, Nietzsche, and Marx.⁵⁰ In fact all but the last four are entirely dismissed by most commentators of London's political ideas.⁵¹ There is wide disagreement as to whether even the last four--Darwin, Spencer, Nietzsche, and Marx--vitally affected London's thinking. On the one hand, Irving Stone insisted that London's working philosophy stemmed directly from these four great minds of the nineteenth century.⁵² On the other hand, in her biography of her father, Joan London discussed her father's so-called philosophy. "As a matter of fact these four thinkers did not influence Jack London as greatly as has been supposed. He read very little of any of them, and studied none."⁵³ Even "Marx, save for The Communist Manifesto, went by the board. . ."⁵⁴ This may very well have been true since the English translation of Das Kapital was not available in America until 1906, and London could not read German.

Whether London was thoroughly familiar with Darwin, Spencer, Nietzsche, and Marx is not very pertinent. It seems well established that he was familiar with their central concepts and

⁵⁰Foner, 34.

⁵¹For examples see Richard O'Connor, Jack London: a Biography; Deming Brown, Soviet Attitude Toward American Writing; and Joan London, Jack London and His Times.

⁵²Stone, 109.

⁵³Joan London, 209.

⁵⁴Ibid.

employed these concepts in his own philosophy. He accepted Marxian socialism as an interpretation of history and a justification for the working class revolution.⁵⁵

As for Darwinism, Jack London accepted it in toto. He saw the natural evolution of life as entirely consistent with his socialist beliefs. London's personal naturalistic and fatalistic philosophy of the survival of the fittest was probably established before he ever read Darwin. His experiences on board the "Sophie Sutherland" and in the Klondike must have schooled him in the concept of natural selection. His knowledge of Darwin, then, simply lent respectability to his own view of nature.

London's admiration for Herbert Spencer is more difficult to understand. At times it caused an ambivalence in his thinking that even he recognized. In 1899, he is reported to have confessed: "No, I am not a revolutionist or a Marxist. I've read too much Spencer for that."⁵⁶ He understood from Spencer that each individual in society must carry on the glorious struggle for self-preservation and procreation. London accepted the basic tenets of Spencer, but rejected those aspects which he could not fit into his own distorted picture of life. He tacitly refuted Spencer's admonition that there should not be a forcible burdening of the superior for the support of the

⁵⁵London's attraction to the philosophy of Nietzsche and its inconsistency with his socialist beliefs are discussed in Chapter 4 of this paper.

⁵⁶Joan London, 207.

inferior.⁵⁷ On the contrary, London preached that it was the duty of the superior to create a society in which all could grow to their full stature.⁵⁸ Furthermore, London refused to accept Spencer's prohibition of legislative interference in business and his belief in the absolute rights of property. Like all good socialists, London called for legislation outlawing child-labor and sweatshop conditions. Though London himself, eventually accumulated large land holdings, he repeatedly called for the overthrow of the system of private property.⁵⁹

Thus, Jack London's socialist philosophy was nothing more than a hodgepodge of contradictory concepts from Darwin, Spencer, Marx, Debs, and a multitude of hoboes, bar-flies, and ten cent California philosophers. London was able to draw from each source those concepts which reinforced his own plan for the resolution of the class-struggle. He called it socialism, but it was really merely an emotional radicalism which lacked even the broad framework of a constructive theory. This was the philosophy which motivated his activities in the socialist movement and his socialist writings.⁶⁰

⁵⁷Foner, 35.

⁵⁸Jack London, "Wanted: a New Law of Development", (ed.) Philip S. Foner, Jack London: American Rebel (New York: The Citadel Press, 1947), 433.

⁵⁹Jack London, "What Communities Lose by the Competitive System", Cosmopolitan, (November, 1900), 23.

⁶⁰Grace I. Colbron, "Jack London, What He Was and What He Accomplished", Bookman, 44(January, 1917), 449.

London and the Socialist Movement

By 1896, the twenty year old Jack London was the possessor of what seemed to him a complete political theory. He became a member of the Socialist Labor Party in the San Francisco area. Like London, the local party held a number of rather unorthodox socialist views. Socialism west of the Rocky Mountains took on many aspects of localism and gradually moved far afield from any sort of pure Marxism. Confronted with unique local and regional problems, the socialists of California were much more attracted to the writings of Henry George, Edward Bellamy, and Daniel De Leon, than to those of Marx.⁶¹ It was De Leon who especially influenced the Socialist Labor Party of San Francisco, and his impact on London is obvious. London always refused to compromise any ground with the capitalist establishment and naively over-estimated the revolutionary possibilities in the United States.⁶²

The amateur socialists of San Francisco came to regard London as a titanic thinker. With his limited knowledge of Marxism, he was accepted by his comrades as one of the real prophets of the movement. For their benefit he analyzed the economic foundations of imperialism and the inevitable emergence of socialism from the contradictions within capitalist society. London's simple, direct approach appealed to intellectuals and working class proletarians alike. Soon he was the primary lecturer at the Sunday night meetings of the Oakland Socialist

⁶¹ Merle Curti, The Growth of American Thought, (2nd Ed., New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951), 614-629.

⁶² Joan London, 118.

Labor local.⁶³

London's relationship with the Socialist Labor Party was usually limited by his activities as a writer. By the turn of the century, most Oakland socialists had left the Socialist Labor Party and had affiliated with the Socialist Party. London followed the migration and, having established an extensive reputation, was nominated as the Socialist Party candidate for mayor of Oakland in 1901. In accepting the nomination, the young candidate said: "It is we, the Socialists, working as a leaven throughout society, who are responsible for the great and growing belief in municipal ownership. It is we, the Socialists, by our propaganda, who have forced the old parties to throw as sops to the popular unrest certain privileges."⁶⁴ London carried out an active campaign, but he received only 245 votes.⁶⁵

Once established as a successful writer, London became the financial patron of the Oakland local of the Socialist Party. It would be impossible to estimate exactly how much money he poured into party coffers, but London, himself, often remarked about his contributions to the local and the national Socialist Party. Since he was constantly in debt, however, his contributions of time and writing are probably more significant. He wrote in a letter to George Sterling: "I feel that I have done and am doing a pretty fair share of the work for the

⁶³O'Connor, 72.

⁶⁴Foner, 45.

⁶⁵Ibid.

Revolution. I guess my lectures alone before socialist organizations have netted the Cause a few hundred dollars, and my wounded feelings from the personal abuse of the Capitalist papers ought to be rated at several hundred more."⁶⁶

Jack London's most significant contribution to the socialist movement in the United States was probably his lecture tour for The Intercollegiate Socialist Society. The Society was inspired by the growth of the socialist vote in the 1904 presidential election and by the world-wide repercussions of the Russian Revolution of 1905. The chief architect was Upton Sinclair and the aim of the Society was to inculcate among college men and women an understanding of socialism. Jack London, one of the most widely respected socialists in America by this time, was one of the first contacted. He enthusiastically responded and at the first meeting on September 12, 1905, was unanimously elected president.⁶⁷ Other members were well aware of the great publicity value in London's name.

London was asked to undertake a lecture tour at a number of colleges throughout the country on behalf of the organization. The idea of such a tour immensely appealed to his personal sense of publicity. He decided to combine free lectures for the Society with a number of appearances before women's clubs and businessmen's organizations for which he would receive substantial fees. The tour started out well enough with people turning out in hordes to see and hear him. Success was short-lived, however, because

⁶⁶Hendrick and Shepard, 172.

⁶⁷Foner, 70.

midway through the tour his divorce was announced. On an impulse, he married Charmian Kittredge. This rather indiscreet act offended many of the pious folk of the Mid-West and resulted in the cancellation of many speaking engagements.

Though his chance to clear a profit from the tour was lost, London managed to bring his personal message of socialism to colleges throughout the East. Nearly everywhere he went, he addressed packed houses. Not only did he preach the socialist gospel, but he also admonished the complacent students to wake up to the social realities of their times. In his Yale address, London berated the student body:

We do not desire merely to make converts. . . If collegians cannot fight for us, we want them to fight against us. . . But what we do not want is that which obtains today and has obtained in the past of the university, a mere deadness and unconcern and ignorance so far as socialism is concerned. Fight for us or fight against us! Raise your voices one way or the other; be alive!⁶⁸

London's speech at Yale, as at most other colleges, was greeted with enthusiastic approval. He was not selling socialism to the students so much as selling his own vitality and political commitment.

Jack London's lectures for the Intercollegiate Socialist Society drew widespread reaction from the public and the press. Many parochial Americans were frightened and offended by his revolutionary speeches and proceeded to have his works removed from their local libraries. Many others were impressed by his reckless courage. In response to London's speech at Yale, the

New York Times commented: "(London) must be commended for his courage and for his honesty. Society can judge socialism better and reach sounder conclusions upon its merits when it has a correct understanding of the nature of socialism and the intentions of socialists."⁶⁹

London's lecture tour came to an abrupt halt in February of 1906, when he fell seriously ill. He returned to California to recuperate and never resumed the tour. He always regarded his association with the Intercollegiate Socialist Society as his most exhilarating experience in the realm of practical politics. Whether the crowds turned out to see London or to hear about socialism is not pertinent. The fact is that he was able to attract more listeners than any other socialist of his time, and his enthusiasm was infectious. Other than his propaganda essays, the lecture tour was London's last active participation in the socialist movement.

London's Socialist Writings

The socialist essays and propaganda tracts which Jack London continually turned out are of interest, though are somewhat less important than his lecture tour. His socialist beliefs are well-documented in these essays if one wants to take him on his word. Many of these essays reveal that he was a rather careful student of contemporary society. He had a penchant for quoting facts and he drew on his vast selection of clippings from newspapers, magazines, books, and government reports. Most of the

⁶⁹ New York Times, February 1, 1906, 8.

essays were published in socialist periodicals, but several found their way into the more respectable journals.⁷⁰

The relative unimportance of London's socialist writings is due to the very limited number of people who read them. In the first place, the average reader attracted to one of London's adventure stories probably did not bother with the author's views on economics.⁷¹ Furthermore, London's fact-filled tirades were not widely recognized as valuable in the solution of world problems because they came about twenty-five years too late. Any sensation they might have caused was lost because the same work was being done by sociologists and economists who were recognized as experts in the field.⁷² The major significance of this material lies in the fact that it was widely utilized by socialists and trade unionists in their missionary work throughout the country.

Probably London's most important contribution to socialist literature was The People of the Abyss. He wrote it at a furious pace while living in the slums of London in 1902. It was a first-hand report on one of the most abhorrent social situations in the world. Furthermore, the irony of the world's wealthiest nation spawning such social conditions was grist for London's literary vindictiveness against capitalism. As he wrote George and Carrie Sterling from England: "I've read of misery, and

⁷⁰ For example: "What Life Means to Me", Cosmopolitan, March, 1906; and "The Scab", Atlantic Monthly, January, 1904.

⁷¹ Colbron, 450.

⁷² Ibid., 449.

seen a bit; but this beats anything I could even have imagined. . . . This I know, the stuff I'm turning out will have to be expurgated or it will never see magazine publication".⁷³

The People of the Abyss was a lengthy narrative description of the slums, but Jack London could not content himself with only an exposé. He drew conclusions which an ordinary sociologist would not have arrived at. In vivid language he sent up the cry:

(The slums are) the progeny of prostitution--of the prostitution of men and women and children, of flesh and blood, and sparkle and spirit; in brief, the prostitution of labor. If this is the best that civilization can do for the human, then give us howling and naked savagery. Far better to be a people of the wilderness and desert, of the cave and the squatting place, than to be a people of the machine and the Abyss.⁷⁴

The cause for such misery, according to London, was the mismanagement of society by capitalists. The answer to the problem was, of course, a socialist commonwealth.

The People of the Abyss was received with mixed reactions upon its publication in 1903. Most of the established magazines and the academic world were not greatly enthused with the work. It was, however, highly regarded by active socialists and brought London to the attention of the entire socialist movement. As with most of his radical works, it was a financial failure and not widely read. The book eventually sold slightly over 20,000 copies.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, it has to stand as London's most highly

⁷³ Hendrick and Shepard, 137.

⁷⁴ Jack London, The People of the Abyss (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1903), 131.

⁷⁵ O'Connor, 170.

regarded work of non-fiction.

London wrote so profusely for the socialist cause that it would be impossible to discuss all his work. Several examples, however, stand out above the rest. In "How I Became a Socialist", published in March, 1903, in The Comrade, an official Socialist Party publication, London outlined the experiences of his life which gradually led him to socialism. "Since that day I have opened many books, but no economic argument, no lucid demonstration of the logic and inevitableness of Socialism affects me as profoundly and convincingly as I was affected on the day when I first saw the walls of the Social Pit rise around me and felt myself slipping down, down, into the shambles at the bottom."⁷⁶ It was London's personal testimony--revealing his fears and aspirations.

Of his many other socialist articles, "The Class Struggle,"⁷⁷ "What Life Means to Me,"⁷⁸ and "Revolution"⁷⁹ deserve special mention. London's withdrawal from active writing for the socialist movement generally coincides with the decline of his creative fiction. It was also simultaneous with his retreat to the security of his ranch in the Sonoma Valley. His disengagement with the socialist movement was achieved gradually. By the year 1911, he no longer had time to turn out essays for journals of the left.

⁷⁶Jack London, "How I Became a Socialist", 365.

⁷⁷Jack London, "The Class Struggle", New York Independent, November 5, 1903.

⁷⁸Jack London, "What Life Means To Me",

⁷⁹Jack London, "Revolution".

but neither were his words of wisdom any longer sought by his socialist brothers. London vehemently proclaimed himself a socialist throughout the rest of his life. Occasionally the socialist doctrine flashes through in his fiction,⁸⁰ but he had become concerned with his new love--the ranch--and his old problem--the bottle.

Impact on the Russian Scene

A final consideration of London's socialism which demands brief mention was the impact of his fiction on both pre-revolutionary and post-revolutionary Russia. Though his works were translated into many languages and read by people all over the world, his popularity reached greater heights in Russia than anywhere else outside the United States. Along with Upton Sinclair and O. Henry, London provided Russians with a kind of literary enjoyment that was particularly suited to their national demands.⁸¹

Until the 1950's, London was by far the most popular American author in Soviet Russia. Over thirteen million copies of his works have been printed since the Revolution.⁸² Even today he is widely read, especially by the youth of the Soviet Union. Since the beginning of the Soviet period, London has been more widely read than any other non-Russian author.

⁸⁰For example see "The Mexican," collected in The Light Born, 1913.

⁸¹Desing Brown, Soviet Attitudes Toward American Writing (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1962), 219.

⁸²Brown, 219.

Even before the Revolution, he was one of the favorite American writers in Russia.⁸³

Though today London has been officially defined as a "petty bourgeois rebel" by the Soviet government, his works are still widely printed and distributed. An eight volume set of his fictional works printed in 1955 sold 600,000 copies almost immediately.⁸⁴ Russians remain great admirers of his fiction, but skeptical of his ideological bent.

London's popularity in the Soviet Union is due more to his rugged philosophy of life than to his avowed socialism. The elemental vigor, love of violence, and brute force which characterize his fiction are popular Russian themes.⁸⁵ Russians are fascinated by the primitive settings of many of his stories, where men pit naked strength against the hostile forces of nature.⁸⁶ The geographic similarities between the Klondike and the northern reaches of the Soviet Union explain the identification of Russians with London's characters. Furthermore, his dramatization of the virtues of courage, perseverance, and strength of will appealed to Russian nature. The virile mood of his writings probably harmonized with the feelings of limitless power and accomplishment through struggle which millions of Russians were

⁸³Ibid.

⁸⁴O'Connor, 386.

⁸⁵This theme has been popularized by such Russian authors as Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Leo Tolstoy, and more recently Mikhail Sholokhov.

⁸⁶Brown, 220.

experiencing after their revolution.⁸⁷ London's philosophy of optimism was very close to their post-revolutionary dream.

Russian critics recognized London's more obvious inconsistencies. He was officially indicted for his racial chauvinism, but his glorification of the "blond beast" was not such a radical departure from the Russian self-image. The Russians rejected economic imperialism, but were not terribly shocked by London's heroes who exploited and subjugated primitive peoples. London attracted the Russians with his identification with the world proletariat, his socialist activities, and his passionate articles on the class struggle in America.⁸⁸ It was his fiction, however, in spite of its seeming paradoxes, which elevated him to the prominent place he holds among authors in the Soviet Union.

Conclusion

Jack London's resignation in 1916 from the Socialist Party gained wide publicity. He claimed that he was leaving the party "because of its lack of fire and fight, and its loss of emphasis on the class struggle".⁸⁹ London went on to imply that the Socialist Party had changed its tactics and goals. "I was originally a member of the old, revolutionary, up-on-its-hind-legs, fighting, Socialist Labor Party. Since then, and to the present time, I have been a fighting member of the Socialist Party."⁹⁰ It is obvious, however, that the change was in Jack

⁸⁷ Ibid., 221.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 223.

⁸⁹ Hendrick and Shepard, 467.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

London, himself, and not in the party. During the last ten years of his life he grew gradually detached from the socialist movement. Furthermore, he must have come to the realization that his own philosophy of life was incompatible with the tenets of the Socialist Party. Thus, London's letter of resignation symbolizes his final relationship with the socialist cause.

The fact was that London's formal resignation from the Socialist Party did not surprise those friends who knew him best. Though his socialist militancy had been taken for granted, he had always escaped at every opportunity the realities of the class-struggle. Socialism to him had always been either a romantic, violent struggle or a sentimental promised land. During the last decade of his life he would argue Marxist doctrine, but only if the debaters came to his ranch. He liked his role as a radical socialist "with a halo of fire, a hint of wrath, a suggestion of danger".⁹¹

There were two particular factors during London's last years that precipitated his final break with the Socialist Party. The first was the Mexican Revolution. His initial reaction was to identify himself with the revolutionaries. He wrote about their activities with glowing praise and even produced a short story, "The Mexican",⁹² to further their cause. The early events of the revolution had stirred imagination, but he soon lost interest. Then in 1913, Hearst Publications hired London to go to Mexico and report on the war. His trip to

⁹¹O'Connor, 385.

⁹²Jack London, "The Mexican", Saturday Evening Post, August 19, 1911.

Mexico coincided with the American intervention at Vera Cruz.

London's response to a direct confrontation with revolution was repugnance for the whole affair. His reports from Mexico revealed a complete change of mind about Mexico and the Mexicans, a reversal which shocked his fellow socialists.⁹³ He asserted that the revolution was a fraud and the revolutionaries simply bandits, and advocated that the United States should take over the country--"police, organize and manage Mexico".⁹⁴ Predictably, London's reports from Mexico brought down the wrath of the socialist press against him.

The second bone of contention between London and the Socialist Party was the issue of American intervention in World War I. The official Socialist Party position proclaimed the war a capitalist struggle, in which no socialists should take part.⁹⁵ The party actively worked to discourage American intervention. This stand drove London to near distraction. He was violently pro-Allied and hotly interventionist. He maintained that Germany was the mad dog of Europe and must be crushed, even if a war of attrition was required.⁹⁶

To the very end Jack London proclaimed his belief in socialism, but his life works stand as a monument to individualism.

⁹³O'Connor, 359.

⁹⁴Foner, 117.

⁹⁵Joan London, 367.

⁹⁶O'Connor, 389.

His views on the Mexican Revolution and the World War were the final steps toward his formal break with the Socialist Party. The real basis for his ultimate rejection of socialism (which he never admitted) lies much deeper---in the very nature of the man.

CHAPTER IV

The Other Jack London

The Paradox in London's Ideas

Jack London's philosophy will probably be debated as long as his works continue to be read. He claimed to be a socialist; in fact, he saw himself as one of the real heroes of the socialist movement in America. The fact remains, however, that there are a number of glaring inconsistencies in his life and works.

In trying to determine the impact London had upon the American reading public it is necessary to weigh his public espousal of socialism against the conflicting ideological basis found throughout his fiction. Without any doubt, more people have been influenced by London's fiction than by his socialist essays or lectures. It is the purpose of this chapter to point out those fundamental concepts in his life and fiction which directly contradict his public position on socialism.⁹⁷ The most notable of the inconsistent characteristics in London's life and fiction include his own individualism, his middle-class aspirations, his attraction to the philosophy of Nietzsche, and his insistent theme of racism and imperialism.

Jack London's own life must be considered one of the great American success stories. Admittedly, he was an extremely talented

⁹⁷ London's three major novels, The Sea Wolf, The Iron Heel, and Martin Eden are excluded from this chapter and dealt in detail in Chapter Five.

person, but his rise to fame and fortune from the most humble beginnings was the result of hard work and perseverance. Furthermore, his success was the result of that particular environment which turned out other American heroes such as Theodore Roosevelt, Robert M. LaFollette, and Henry Ford.

London, along with most of the other socialist novelists of his times, had an overwhelming romantic gusto for the American way of life. He was the product of a generation dominated by both the dream of social reform and the dream of world imperialism. The same period which saw socialism's greatest growth in America inspired the worship of brute strength and talk of Anglo-Saxon supremacy.⁹⁸ In such an environment London had no difficulty preaching Marxism and Nietzscheanism at the same time. As an admirer of Rudyard Kipling, he found a source for an instinctive imperialist worship of force and conquest. With Theodore Roosevelt he shared the sense of Nordic superiority which was common to their time.⁹⁹

Thus, during the time when America was becoming aware of its own strength, London's fiction was the leading source of primitive adventure stories. He reveled in his role as a hero of the socialist movement, but he was a prototype of the violence-loving intellectual.¹⁰⁰ One of the primary reasons for London's importance today is the concentration in his fiction of the insurgence and obsession with power that came to the fore in the Progressive

⁹⁸Kazin, 70.

⁹⁹Ibid., 71.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., 84.

Era. To his contemporaries he was the "American ideal, the perfect warrior which every American. . .would wish to be".¹⁰¹

The Individualist with Middle-Class Aspirations

Long before Jack London joined the ranks of the socialist movement he had entered into the struggle for economic and social survival in the free enterprise system of America. His experiences as an oyster pirate, sailor, and tramp had instilled in his nature the lust for competition. His brief attempts at high school and college convinced him of his own intellectual capacities. Then, his frustrated romance with Mabel Applegarth, the epitome of middle-class values, drove his ambitions upward.

Despite London's sympathy for the working-class, his attachment for the social basement was more defensive than real. One of the most notable characteristics of his fiction was shame and distaste for his own origins. As a proletarian, he desired more than anything else not to be a proletarian. He was faced with two ways of achieving his escape: to climb out of the working-class or to abolish it completely. The first depended on luck or unusual ability. The second was a long, slow process which demanded unswerving faith and complete selflessness.¹⁰² For London the only way was the short-cut. He possessed those special gifts which could lift him out of his class.

But London's conflict with the socialist cause involved more than just his superior abilities. After a short period

¹⁰¹Stephen Graham, The Death of Yesterday (London: Ernest Benn Limited, 1930), 57.

¹⁰²Joan London, 182.

of initial enthusiasm, his skepticism began to grow. By the time his literary career blossomed, he had lost faith in the proletariat as a combative group. He no longer believed that the socialist state would be achieved within his own lifetime. The thought of being poor throughout his life made him desperate for material security. Out of sheer hatred for the poverty that he had known as a youth, London was determined to leave the social pit forever.¹⁰³

This drive for material security somehow transcended the usual conservatism that accompanies financial well-being. London's quest for money and land was a manifestation of the shame he associated with poverty. He felt he had to beat the hated capitalists at their own game. Furthermore, his personal ambitions were easily distorted to conform to his so-called philosophy of life. Throughout his fiction there is the Darwinian conviction of an inevitable victory of the strong. London saw himself as the model of strength and the proletariat as the slave class, the mass of weaklings.¹⁰⁴

Though London's fiction is replete with examples of this rampant individualist ethic, The Call of the Wild best exemplifies it. The story of Buck, the super-dog, was the story of London's own fierce struggle to rise from poverty and squalor to a position of distinction and security. London wrote it as the story of all strong people who use the cunning of their minds and the strength of their bodies to adapt themselves to a difficult environment

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Geismar, 178.

and win through to live. The weak, of course, must surrender and die.

London created Buck as the invincible model of himself. He never believed in any strength equal to his, for that strength had come from his own self-assertion. Violence, then, was the product, the natural reaction of the strong.¹⁰⁵ As Buck conquered the environment of the North, London had also proved himself by violence. Furthermore, it was by violence that London's greatest characters came to life.¹⁰⁶ For these heroes, violence was the only avenue of expression in a world which, as London saw it, was a testing-ground for the strong. Violence expressed the truth of life, both the violence of the naturalist creed and the violence of superior men and women.¹⁰⁷

Thus, it seems clear that London's contemporaries were influenced more by his glorification of individualism than by his occasional socialist message. He was one of a generation still too close to its own frontier to lack appreciation for red-blooded romances. The message in The Call of the Wild reinforced the American feeling of omnipotence and self-confidence. Furthermore, it thrilled the American public with passages like:

It was Buck, a live hurricane of fury, hurling himself upon them in a frenzy to destroy. He sprang at the foremost man. . . . , ripping the throat wide open till the rent jugular spouted a fountain of blood. He did not pause to worry

¹⁰⁵L. S. Friedman, "Jack London As Titan", Dial, 62 (January 25, 1917), 50.

¹⁰⁶The best examples are Wolf Larsen in The Sea Wolf, Ernest Everhard in The Iron Heel, Billy Roberts in The Valley of the Moon, Burning Daylight in Burning Daylight, and Martin Eden in Martin Eden.

¹⁰⁷Kazin, 87.

the victims, but ripped in passing, with the next bound tearing wide open the throat of a second man.¹⁰⁸

In short, his message was a far cry from the socialist brotherhood of man. London saw life as a constant struggle. "The single law was Eat or Be Eaten."¹⁰⁹ He equaled any of the ministers of Social Darwinism in his glorification of the struggle of life. He must have surpassed most Social Darwinists in his worship of the victors of the struggle. He saw his environment as something to be conquered. "About me are the great natural forces. . .and these insensate monsters do not know that tiny sensitive creature, all nerves and weaknesses, whom men call Jack London, and who himself thinks he is all right and quite a superior being."¹¹⁰

Whether a socialist or not, London's own individualism was the dominant characteristic of his personality. The force of his fiction both influenced his huge reading public and reflected many of their national traits. He played all the roles of his generation with astonishing credibility--"the insurgent reformer, the follower of Darwin and Herbert Spencer, the naturalist who worked amid romantic scenes, and especially the kind of self-made success, contemptuous of others, that at the same time appealed to contemporary taste and frightened it."¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸Jack London, The Call of the Wild (New York: the Macmillan Company, 1903), 98.

¹⁰⁹Geismar, 195.

¹¹⁰Jack London, The Cruise of the Snark (New York: the Macmillan Company, 1911), 6.

¹¹¹Kazin, 87.

Not only did he inspire a taste for brutality, but he satisfied one as well. His adventure stories, though shocking to most readers, proved a key in the process of twentieth century American self-identification. This ethic was a glorification of the individual's victory in the competitive society.

Nietzsche and the London Superman

The naturalist school of literature in America is replete with recurring examples of the superman image.¹¹² There are, however, a wide range of fictional conceptions of this phenomenon.¹¹³ In the works of London the superman image is probably more dominant than in those of any other writer of his time. Furthermore, certain aspects of his superman bear a striking resemblance to the hero image evolved in the philosophy of Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche.

As has been repeatedly illustrated in this paper, London's own experiences modified and conditioned his reactions to his readings in philosophy. This factor was probably most prominent in his interpretation of Nietzsche. Upon his first reading of Nietzsche (or about Nietzsche) London must have consciously (or unconsciously) been struck by two obvious parallels. In the first place, Nietzsche's approach to life was very similar to

¹¹²Charles C. Walcutt, "Naturalism and the Superman In the Novels of Jack London," Papers of the Michigan Academy of Science, Arts, and Letters, 24 (Part IV, 1938), 89.

¹¹³As well as in the works of Jack London, the superman image can be noted in the writings of Frank Norris, Stephen Crane, and Hamlin Garland.

London's. Secondly, Nietzsche described his superman in such terms as London saw himself.

The similarities between Nietzsche's approach to life and that of London are numerous. Though Nietzsche often criticized the romantics of his time, he was unconsciously a romantic himself.¹¹⁴ Furthermore, Nietzsche attempted to combine two sets of values which are not easily harmonized. On the one hand, he liked ruthlessness, war, and aristocratic pride. On the other hand, he loved philosophy, literature, and the arts.¹¹⁵ Nietzsche, unlike many of his contemporaries, did not worship the State; rather he was a passionate individualist, a believer in the hero.

The similarities between Nietzsche's superman and London's self-image are no less striking. The Nietzschean superman was a blond beast, biologically superior to his fellow men.¹¹⁶ Intellectually he was an aristocrat, schooled in the humanities as well as the sciences. The race of supermen were those who conquered their environments, the victors in war and their descendants.¹¹⁷ London claimed to have thoroughly read Nietzsche. In a letter to Frederick Bamford, he said: "Personally I like Nietzsche tremendously, but I cannot go all the way with him."¹¹⁸

¹¹⁴ Bertrand Russell, A History of Western Philosophy (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1946), 760.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 761.

¹¹⁶ H. L. Mencken, The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche (Boston, Mass.: Luce Company, 1913), 112.

¹¹⁷ Russell, 769.

¹¹⁸ Georgia L. Bamford, The Mystery of Jack London (Oakland, California: Published by Georgia L. Bamford, 1931), 210.

Most commentators, however, are skeptical.¹¹⁹ Certainly London's early fiction was not influenced by Nietzsche, because his conception of the superman was not widely known in America until after 1905.¹²⁰ Most likely, London justified his preconceptions after coming across Nietzsche's philosophy in the latter part of his literary career.

Anyway, London's own experiences in the social milieu, his concept of Social Darwinism, and his spirit of American Assertiveness would account for the physical and cultural giants he created. In terms of materialism, London's superman was strikingly similar to Nietzsche's. Both were the apotheoses of individualism--selfish, cunning, amoral, achieving happiness through the fullest indulgence of their will to power. Both held that ethical ideas which teach a man to deny himself and restrain his impulses as fundamentally evil are doctrines preached by weaklings in their efforts to protect themselves from the strong.¹²¹ Indeed, for London, "The ultimate word is I LIKE. It lies beneath philosophy, and is twined about the heart of life."¹²²

In other ways, London's heroes fell short of Nietzsche's. The Nietzschean superman was the most complete possible development of human capacities, physical and intellectual alike. This prototype was an ideal, an absolute which Nietzsche saw

¹¹⁹ See, for example, Joan London, Richard O'Connor, Philip S. Foner, and Maxwell Geismar.

¹²⁰ Walcutt, 95.

¹²¹ Ibid., 94.

¹²² London, The Cruise of the Snark, 3.

as a goal for mankind. London, however, attempted to turn his superman into a reality. The result was that his heroes were blessed with little more than the gift of a magnificent animality, and the absence of a social code which would prevent them from inflicting this gift upon their neighbors.¹²³

A final consideration is London's obsession with the wolf-image. He very much liked the word "wolf" and was attached to the idea of the wolf as a primordial ancestor of the dog. His self-association with the wolf-image can be documented in several places in his fiction. The two most obvious references are Call of the Wild and White Fang. Son of the Wolf and The Sea Wolf also have connotations of self-identification. Evidently, he liked to think of himself as a wolf, running free, proudly alone as he loped through the wilderness, a throwback to the animal state for which he yearned. In one of his best short stories, "Love of Life", London dramatically revealed this schizoid trait as a death struggle between a starving man and a sick wolf:

There was life all around him, but it was strong life, very much alive and well, and he knew the sick wolf clung to the sick man's trail in the hope that the man would die first. In the morning, on opening his eyes, he beheld it regarding him with a wistful and hungry stare.¹²⁴

The identification with the wolf-image in his private life was even more overt. He was highly pleased that his friend

¹²³ Lewis Mumford, The Golden Day (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1926), 249.

¹²⁴ Jack London, "Love of Life," collected in Best Short Stories of Jack London (Garden City, N. Y.: The Sun Dial Press, 1945), 223.

George Sterling, affectionately referred to him as "The Wolf", "The Fierce Wolf" or "The Shaggy Wolf.¹²⁵ It was during the last period of London's life, when his ranch became his total obsession, that he decided to name his great mansion The Wolf House. Obviously London saw this shrine as the lair in which "the wolf" would spend his last days. A final example of his quest for the wolf-image took place during the last month of his life. His wife, Charmian, asked him what she should have engraved upon a wristwatch he had given her. He replied: "Oh, 'Mate from Wolf', I guess. . . I have sometimes wished you would call me 'wolf' more often."¹²⁶ These examples illustrate that which can be found throughout London's life and fiction: he was drawing fancied portraits of himself in his strong-minded heroes and primitive wolves. In the course of it all, London himself became a civilized dog, reconciled to kennel and master. But he constantly bayed at both men and the moon to assure them that he was wolf at heart.¹²⁷

The Race Gospel In America

Throughout the whole of Jack London--his life, his philosophy, and his fiction--there is the constant theme of racism. The London heroes were nearly always giants of Anglo-Saxon

¹²⁵ Walcutt, 90.

¹²⁶ Charmian London, 72.

¹²⁷ Graham, 59.

ancestry. They were the Nordics, the blond, blue-eyed descendants of the Vikings, "the dominant races come down out of the North".¹²⁸ This was a remarkable theme for one of the apostles of the socialist brotherhood of men. Nevertheless, in his first novel, A Daughter of the Snows, published in 1902, he set the mood for what became his pet theory. The Nordic was "a great race, half the earth its heritage and all the sea! In three score generations, it rules the world."¹²⁹ His enthusiasm for the dominant race was more lyrical than was ever any Waffen--SS recruiting poster.

But where did London get this extreme, racial Anglophilia? He thought he had observed it first-hand at sea and in the North. Furthermore, he must have seen himself as a prototype of this Nordic race. In the selection of his first wife, Bess Maddern, he chose a strong and handsome woman who would produce for him "seven sturdy Saxon sons and seven beautiful daughters".¹³⁰ He didn't make clear exactly where the Saxon blood was coming from, since London himself was at least half Welsh and his wife was of Celtic extraction.

Joan London, in her biography of her father, concluded that he must have been an ardent student of Benjamin Kidd.¹³¹

¹²⁸ Jack London, A Daughter of the Snows (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1902), 146.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 147.

¹³⁰ O'Connor, 139.

¹³¹ Joan London, 211. Benjamin Kidd was one of the leading exponents of Social Darwinism during the late nineteenth century.

Their views on the racial supremacy of the Anglo-Saxons were almost exactly the same. They shared the belief that all social progress in the world had been the result of the Anglo-Saxon race. This breed had been history's most effective exterminator of the less-developed peoples with whom it came into competition.¹³² This extermination had not come about as much through wars as through the result of the higher cultural, intellectual, and physical development of the Anglo-Saxons. The weaker races disappeared before the stronger through the effects of mere contact.¹³³

Thus, in reading Kidd, London found not only a justification for his earlier prejudices, but a thrilling explanation for his own self-image and the growing feeling of American assertiveness as well. With the exception of a few socialists, London's racial chauvinism was accepted by most Americans without question. As noted earlier, it was widely espoused by many, including Theodore Roosevelt. Such acceptance is illustrated by an article written on London in 1906:

The theory of evolution had made him more conscious than ever of the profound tragedy of life. . . . The spectacle of degenerating, dying races, or of races dormant for ages springing titan-like from their sleep to grapple with full-panoplied civilization was his fascination, and was the base of his imagination. The relation of man to the past, his slow racial development through the ages, his sub-conscious memories of the long forgotten experiences of far-off ancestors, his struggle to master his instincts,

¹³² Benjamin Kidd, Social Evolution (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1898), 247.

¹³³ Ibid., 287.

opened undreamed of vistas of life, and furnished the young writer's richest material.¹³⁴

Most commentators found nothing remarkable about so much concern with racial beginnings.

London's friend Cloutesley Johns was one of the first to question this theme of racism. Throughout their correspondence, London offered any number of explanations. In a letter dated June 7, 1899, he asserted: "The Anglo-Saxon race, with its strength and virtues, was born of hard times. It is not easily kept down; the victims of oppression must be of some other stock. We who live in America, and who constitute the heart of this republic, are the sons and daughters of him that overcometh."¹³⁵ In another letter to Johns that same year, London wrote: "If a man would save an animal from pain, another kind of altruism is brought to bear; the same if he saves a nigger, or a red, a yellow, or a brown. But let Mr. White meet another white hemmed in by dangers from the other colors--these whites will not need to know each other--but they will hear the call of blood and stand back to back."¹³⁶

While London must have been aware of a conflict between his socialism and his racial chauvinism, he consistently incorporated both concepts into his philosophy of life. He seemed to foresee a socialist utopia for the Nordic race only. "Socialism is not an ideal system, devised by man for the happiness of all

¹³⁴H. M. Bland, "Jack London: Traveler, Novelist, and Social Reformer", Craftsman, 9(1906), 611.

¹³⁵Hendrick and Shepard, 40.

¹³⁶Ibid., 43.

men; but it is devised for the happiness of certain kindred races. It is devised so as to give more strength to these certain kindred favored races so that they may survive and inherit the earth to the extinction of the lesser, weaker races."¹³⁷ Upon being criticized by some of his socialist comrades for his racist beliefs, London answered: "What the devil! I am first of all a white man and only then a socialist".¹³⁸

As a correspondent sent by the Hearst Publications to report the Russo-Japanese War, London gave vent in his dispatches to his anti-Oriental prejudices. Upon observing the efficiency of the Japanese army and the masses of Chinese people, he became convinced that a wave of yellow men--"The Yellow Peril"¹³⁹--was about to rise up and swarm over the white races of the west. The impending racial conflict, he thought, would come to a head in his own time.¹⁴⁰

From the beginning, London's sympathies had been with the Russians, the fellow caucasians. The defeat of these whites by the little yellow men drove him frantic. In one dispatch he revealed his sensations at the sight of a group of Russian prisoners:

¹³⁷ Joan London, 212.

¹³⁸ O'Connor, 220.

¹³⁹ "The Yellow Peril" was an essay first printed in The San Francisco Examiner, September 25, 1904.

¹⁴⁰ Richard Hofstadter, Social Darwinism In American Thought (Boston, Mass.: The Beacon Press, 1958), 189.

...the sight I saw was a blow in the face to me. On my mind it had the stunning effect of the sharp impact of a man's fist. There was a man, a white man, with blue eyes, looking at me. He was dirty and unkempt. He had been through a fierce battle. But his eyes were bluer than mine and his skin was as white. . . .I caught myself gasping. A choking sensation was in my throat. These men were my kind.¹⁴¹

London's return from Asia found him more convinced than ever of Nordic superiority. The fear and hatred that he developed for the Orientals increased throughout his life.

Very closely related to his racial chauvinism was London's belief in imperialism. The idea that an emerging America should share with Great Britain the burden of expanding the dominions of the Anglo-Saxon race was the logical conclusion of his whole philosophy of racial superiority. He was an admirer of Kipling and was charmed by the lyrical prose which praised the "dominant bourgeoisie, the war march of the white men around the world, the triumphant paean of imperialism".¹⁴² Surely, London understood the economic underpinnings of his race glorification. Rather than being naive, he was probably consciously accepting and exploiting the superstitions and prejudices of his time.

In any case, London's fiction sung the praises of the Anglo-Saxons as they evolved in the United States. In nearly all his heroes he endeavored to present in the flesh the perfect American warrior. Certainly in London himself--adventurer, author, and intellectual--his contemporaries saw what they thought was the model of strenuous Americanism.¹⁴³ But neither London

¹⁴¹Foner, 59.

¹⁴²Geismar, 173.

¹⁴³Bland, 614.

nor his heroes were real. They were simply a romantic "exaggeration of the spirit of America as a whole, an exaggeration and a burlesque",¹⁴⁴ but they held the attention of the nation. It was little wonder, then, that London, his fiction, and his countrymen were inextricably caught up in the ethic of Nordic supremacy and the manifest destiny of America across the face of the globe.¹⁴⁵

An interesting aspect of London's racial chauvinism was the twin dilemma of his own life. In the first place he was throughout his life frustrated by the mystery of his own origins. He had firmly established the illegitimate nature of his birth and the fact that John London was definitely not his father. He must have suspected (as did most of his biographers) that his father was Professor Chaney. In their correspondence, however, Chaney adamantly denied the charge and London was left in the shadow of doubt.

Directly related to London's illegitimacy was his obsession to produce a male heir. He readily admitted that he had chosen his first wife specifically for the task of bringing forth a son. Further evidence of his obsession was the resulting unhappiness when both his marriages failed to produce a male offspring. The psychological implications of London's illegitimacy and his inability to leave a male heir are complex indeed. In view of his preoccupation with racial origins, this personal dilemma

¹⁴⁴Graham, 57.

¹⁴⁵Daniel Aaron, Writers on the Left (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1961), 38.

lends a mien of tragic irony to his life and works.

Conclusion

As a socialist Jack London compensated for his ideological weaknesses with his characteristic enthusiasm. The inconsistencies of his life and fiction with the socialist creed provide a more profound evaluation of America's most widely-read author during the first decade of the twentieth century. It would be a disservice to attempt to judge London's work without also appreciating the environmental forces which shaped his life and fiction. Probably more than any other writer in his generation, he was profoundly and consciously affected by his times.

Individualism, Social Darwinism, racism, and imperialism were all fundamental elements of middle-class thought in the United States.¹⁴⁶ These factors were manifestations of the crude mythology of a rising social class seeking a base for its claim of superiority. Jack London's contribution to this new-found assertiveness was significant. He provided, in the flesh and in his fiction, the prototype of the perfect American warrior, the result of biological determinism in the new world.

It is not really surprising that London, obsessed with his own illegitimate birth and propelled by his rise out of the social pit, should have been drawn to the cult of violence, blood, and race. His heroes stormed the heights of their own minds, and shouted that they were storming the world. His contemporaries read his fiction as adventures, symbols of their own muscularity.

¹⁴⁶Geismar, 214.

Moreover, his fiction keynoted the transition of America into its new role in world affairs--confident, aggressive, and powerful.

CHAPTER V

London's Fiction Under Analysis

Three Faces of Jack London

Having discussed in general terms London's life and fiction, a detailed investigation of certain selected works should illuminate and illustrate a number of conclusions. It is the purpose of this chapter to analyze three of London's novels--The Sea Wolf,¹⁴⁷ The Iron Heel,¹⁴⁸ and Martin Eden¹⁴⁹--in order to compare and contrast the recurrent themes which his fiction espouses.

These three novels have been selected for several reasons. In the first place, with the exception of The Call of the Wild (really an extended short story), The Sea Wolf, The Iron Heel, and Martin Eden were probably London's best novels. At least, they have endured the test of time better than have any of his other long works. Of equal importance, the three central characters of these novels--Wolf Larsen, Ernest Everhard, and Martin Eden--represent the most complete development of London's fictionalized self-image.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁷ Jack London, The Sea Wolf (New York: Bantam Books, 1960).

¹⁴⁸ Jack London, The Iron Heel (New York: Sagamore Press, Inc., 1957).

¹⁴⁹ Jack London, Martin Eden (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1956).

¹⁵⁰ Fred Lewis Pattee, The New American Literature: 1890-1930 (New York: The Century Company, 1930), 130.

All three novels have been widely read in the United States as well as abroad. The Sea Wolf, published in 1904, was an immediate literary success. After The Call of the Wild it was London's most popular work. The Iron Heel, which enjoyed less immediate success, has gradually risen to a prominent place among his works. It appeared in 1908, arriving on the literary scene near enough the abortive Russian Revolution of 1905, to cause a mild sensation. Furthermore, its influence on twentieth century revolutionaries and its remarkable prophesies of the coming of fascism transcend what little financial success it initially enjoyed. Martin Eden was, and is, generally celebrated as London's best fictionalized autobiography. As such, it was widely read, ranking only behind The Call of the Wild and The Sea Wolf in terms of copies sold. Published in 1909, Martin Eden was treated harshly by most critics, but in spite of its faults it remains as one of London's most powerful and enduring works.

The three novels are especially pertinent to this study because each dramatically illustrates the political conflicts of London's fiction. Dramatized in each is the conflict between individualism and idealistic socialism. The problem is closely linked with London's concept of class conflict and the Horatio Alger ethic. Throughout the three novels is London's underlying worship of power, violence, and conquest. Each novel reveals a stage in London's self-analysis and the evolution of his thinking which led him to suicide.

The Sea Wolf

If we were to take London's word that The Sea Wolf was an indictment of individualism, it would be necessary to dismiss it as a total failure and turn our attention to another work. The Sea Wolf is significant, however, precisely because it is a glorification of individualism (and all which it implies), rather than an indictment. The villain of the story, Wolf Larsen, the Nietzschean captain of the "Ghost", became the most memorable human character London ever created. As the prototype of strength, courage, violence, and masculinity, those traits which London so admired, Larsen is rivaled only by the dog Buck of The Call of the Wild.

As a novel the first half of The Sea Wolf is a great adventure story combined with the credible development of an almost incredible character--Larsen.¹⁵¹ It moves rapidly and the dialogue between Larsen and his antithesis, Humphrey Van Weyden, brilliantly reveals the superman's philosophy. With the introduction of the female character, Maud Brewster, about half way through the story, the novel becomes unbelievably bad.¹⁵² The last half is permeated with sentimentalism and Victorian proprieties which destroy the credibility of either the story or the social message.

Briefly, the novel is structured around Humphrey Van Weyden, a refined literary-type who has never known physical

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 134.

¹⁵² Ibid.

labor. Van Weyden is placed at the mercy of Wolf Larsen when he is rescued from a ship wreck by the sealing schooner "Ghost". Larsen refuses to return Van Weyden to San Francisco, but, instead, forces him to become a cabin-boy. Van Weyden, the product of a sheltered, middle-class society, soon finds that the values he has always lived by are flouted and he must accept the survival code which rules the lives of the men on the schooner. He first comes under the power of a miserable Cockney cook, Thomas Mugridge, and realizes that he must either crush the cook or be crushed by him.

Van Weyden's introduction to the pitiless and brutal environment of the "Ghost" is drollfully observed and manipulated by Larsen. As they sail toward the sealing waters of Asia, Larsen frequently summons Van Weyden to his cabin to talk philosophy. It is in these conversations that the conflict between Larsen's atavistic individualism and Van Weyden's Christian morality is revealed. In each instance, however, the scholarly Van Weyden is overpowered and dominated by the primitive reasoning of Larsen.

The story is liberally interspersed with various adventures and personality conflicts. The drama is heightened by the characterization of Larsen as "the perfect type of primitive man, born a thousand years or generations too late and an anachronism in this culminating century of civilization".¹⁵³ As for Van Weyden, he begins to adapt to his new environment and soon becomes as tough as his shipmates. Larsen observes the change in him with

¹⁵³ The Sea Wolf, 52.

sardonic amusement and promotes him to mate. Throughout the story Van Weyden is aware of his own weakness as compared to the Sea Wolf's strength. It is a constant source of shame which leads him to worship the absolute dominance which Larsen holds over everyone and everything around him. Larsen is portrayed as the master of every situation, whether it be the defiance of a dozen hardened sailors or the most devastating typhoon nature can brew up. In fact, the Sea Wolf seems to seek out violence and to flirt with chaos in order to continually reassert himself. He is unreasonably brutal in his treatment of the crew and throughout the story Van Weyden remains a passive observer to avoid involving himself.

After weathering a typhoon, the "Ghost" picks up a life boat containing Maud Brewster, a beautiful young woman and renowned poetess. Thus, half way through the story the third major character is literally washed into the plot. As a result, the tough-minded and realistic narrative breaks down, and a romance between Van Weyden and Maud Brewster begins to bud. Larsen, however, has other plans. To him, Maud Brewster is nothing more than a female animal to be ravished purely for sexual satisfaction. The result, of course, is that Larsen attacks the woman and Van Weyden intervenes. Just as the mad sea captain is about to crush Van Weyden, he is stricken with a blinding headache. This fortuitous turn of events allows Van Weyden and his gentle poetess to make good their escape by open boat across the northern sea.

The flight of the enamored couple is replete with hardships

until they are cast up on a desolate island in the northern Pacific. As they prepare to await a chance rescue, the "Ghost", with only Larsen aboard, is washed up on the very beach where they have set up housekeeping. Though he has been deserted by his crew, the blind and dying Sea Wolf still represents a threat to the harmony of the hero and heroine. When Van Weyden tries to restore the "Ghost," the wretched Larsen, determined to die with his ship, thwarts his attempts. Finally, when Van Weyden is unable (or unwilling) to kill Larsen, the giant is struck by another attack and dies.

Upon restoring the schooner, Van Weyden and his beloved manage to set sail. In a short time they are rescued by a U. S. revenue cutter. The final lines epitomize the ludicrous proprieties which dominate and destroy the last half of the novel:

"One kiss, dear love," I whispered. "One kiss before they come."

"And rescue us from ourselves," she completed, with a most adorable smile, whimsical as I had ever seen it, for it was whimsical with love.¹⁵⁴

With a few exceptions, only the first half of The Sea Wolf provides insights into the political ideas of Jack London. The relations between the stainless lovers, Humphrey Van Weyden and Maud Brewster, need be acknowledged only as the factor which damaged the validity of the novel. It is the confrontation of the civilized Van Weyden with the primordialism of Larsen which reveals the significance of the work.

The characterization of Wolf Larsen overwhelmingly dominates

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 252.

The Sea Wolf. According to London, the whole purpose of the novel was to illustrate that the Nietzschean hero was doomed by his inevitable imperfections. In a letter to Mary Austin in 1915, London wrote: "Long years ago, at the very beginning of my writing career. I attacked Nietzsche and his super-man idea. This was in The Sea Wolf. Lots of people read The Sea Wolf, no one discovered that it was an attack upon the super-man philosophy."¹⁵⁵ It is a fact that every major review of The Sea Wolf missed the point as London claimed to have intended it.¹⁵⁶ But investigation of the novel readily reveals the cause of what London claimed was a misinterpretation.

The fact is that in creating the character of Wolf Larsen. London produced some of his best fiction. In comparison to Larsen, Humphrey Van Weyden is almost a non-character. He is little more than a literary device for the development of Larsen as the central character. The overriding characteristic of Wolf Larsen is the similarity he bears to his creator. It is almost inconceivable that an author would try to indict an autobiographical character, but that is precisely what London did (if we accept his word for it) in The Sea Wolf.¹⁵⁷

The evidence that Wolf Larsen was the self-portrait of Jack London is manifold. On the surface, the name Wolf Larsen

¹⁵⁵ Hendrick and Shepard, 463.

¹⁵⁶ See, for example, the reviews of The Sea Wolf in The Independent 58 (Jan. 5, 1905), 39 and Bookman 20 (Nov., 1904), 219.

¹⁵⁷ Henry Steele Commager, The American Mind (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1950), 11.

has obvious connotations. London was infatuated with the word "Wolf". He liked to think of himself as a wolf among dogs and, as discussed in Chapter Four, encouraged his friends to call him "Wolf". As for the surname, London and Larsen are too similar for mere coincidence.

But the name is really very superficial. Much more conclusive is the physical description of Larsen. As seen through the eyes of the weakling Van Weyden, the Sea Wolf is everything London wanted to be and thought he was.

His height was probably about five feet ten inches. . . . but my first impression of the man was of his strength. . . . It was a strength we are not wont to associate with things primitive, with wild animals. . . . a strength savage, ferocious, alive in itself, the essence of life in that it is the potency of motion. . . . though this strength pervaded every action of his, it seemed but the advertisement of a greater strength that lurked within, that lay dormant. . . . but which might arouse, at any moment, terrible and compelling, like the rage of a lion or the wrath of a storm.¹⁵⁸

The muscularity with which London was so vitally concerned was not only of the body, but of the soul as well. Van Weyden perceived that Larsen's strength transcended the physical realm. It was "an immense vigor or virility of spirit that lay behind and beyond and out of sight."¹⁵⁹ All this strength did not lie dormant. Larsen was capable of action as London could imagine it in no other, save himself. Violence and brutality became virtues in the environment dominated by Larsen: ". . . it was over and done with between the ticks of two seconds. Larsen

¹⁵⁸ The Sea Wolf, 13.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 17.

had sprung fully six feet across the deck and driven his fist into the other's stomach. . . . He lifted into the air, described a short curve and struck the deck on his head and shoulders, where he lay and writhed about in agony.¹⁶⁰ Indeed, at times, Larsen's feats reached superhuman proportions. Set upon by seven strong men in the forecastle of the ship, he climbed a ladder "by the might of his arms, the whole pack of men striving to drag him back and down. . . . no man less than a giant could have done what he did."¹⁶¹

In relating the brutality of Wolf Larsen, London outdoes himself in vivid description. The credibility of the violence is the direct result of the author's enthusiasm--his eagerness to relate things he believed he understood. In punishing one of the seamen, Larsen and his mate "struck him with their fists, kicked him with their heavy shoes, knocked him down, and dragged him to his feet to knock him down again. His eyes were blinded so that he could not see, and the blood running from his ears, nose, and mouth turned the cabin into a shambles. And when he could no longer rise they still continued to beat and kick him where he lay."¹⁶² Then for good measure Larsen turned on his mate and struck a blow which hurled him "back like a cork, driving his head against the wall with a crash."¹⁶³ The whole novel is composed of repeated scenes of brutality and violence.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 21.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 95.

¹⁶² Ibid., 80.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

Though for the most part absolutely senseless, it is the descriptions of these scenes and of their perpetrator that makes The Sea Wolf memorable.

If this preoccupation with brutality in The Sea Wolf indicates a certain latent sadism on the part of the author, it is accompanied by rather overt overtones of narcissism.¹⁶⁴ It should be noted that both Wolf Larsen and Humphrey Van Weyden are at least semi-autobiographical. London's characterization of Van Weyden never comes through anything more than a device for observing Larsen, but as such, the weakling scholar serves his purpose well. Thus, it is suggested that London worships his own body as he has Van Weyden worship the body of Wolf Larsen.

I had never before seen him stripped, and the sight of his body quite took my breath away. It has never been my weakness to exalt the flesh--far from it; but there is enough of the artist in me to appreciate its wonder. I must say that I was fascinated by the perfect lines of Wolf Larsen's figure, and by what I may term the terrible beauty of it. . . His body, thanks to his Scandinavian stock, was fair as the fairest woman's.¹⁶⁵

There are numerous other examples of this narcissism throughout the text. The significance of the sadism and narcissism of The Sea Wolf lies in the fact that both are manifestations of extreme individualism.

The personality of London is infused into his characterization in terms of the author's lust for women and strong drink. Van Weyden repeatedly mentions Larsen's obvious virility, and the

¹⁶⁴Geismar, 179.

¹⁶⁵The Sea Wolf, 99.

members of the crew tell tales of some of the captain's sexual conquests. Included also in the characterization of Larsen was his ability to hold his liquor. This was another manifestation of what London thought was masculinity. Van Weyden is terribly impressed with the captain's ability with the bottle. "Wolf Larsen was unaffected by the drink, yet he drank glass for glass, and if anything his glasses were fuller. There was no change in him."¹⁶⁶

The Horatio Alger ethic which so endeared London to his own success story is included in the development of Wolf Larsen. Contrasted with Van Weyden who had never worked a day in his life. Larsen is the absolute image of a self-made man. Though he had the aristocratic blood of the Nordics coursing through his veins, his life began in abject poverty. By sheer force of will he struggled ever upward. "Cabin-boy at twelve, ship's boy at fourteen, ordinary seaman at sixteen, able seaman at seventeen, and cock of the fo'c'sle, infinite ambition and infinite loneliness, receiving neither help nor sympathy, I did it all for myself. . . Master and owner of a ship at the top of my life."¹⁶⁷

The most decisive revelation of Larsen as the London self-image comes when Van Weyden discovers that the muscular captain is also an intellectual. The captain's cabin is filled with books--Shakespeare, Tennyson, Poe, Darwin, Shaw and many others that only a true intellectual would read. Van Weyden is, of

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 54.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 70.

course, overwhelmed by this: "It was patent then this terrible man was no ignorant clod, such as one would inevitably suppose him to be from his exhibitions of brutality. At once he became an enigma. One side or the other of his personality was perfectly comprehensible; but both sides together were bewildering."¹⁶⁸

Van Weyden's discovery opens the door for the direct confrontation of the two opposing philosophies. Van Weyden's view of life never is made clear, but presumably it is one of love and morality consistent with the twentieth century Christian world. It is the philosophy of Larsen, the primitive code of survival of the fittest, which totally dominates these discussions. In every instance, the Sea Wolf's arguments overpower those of the scholar.¹⁶⁹ In answer to Van Weyden's assertion that immorality is the end for life, Larsen declares the ethic of primordial individualism:

I believe life is a mess. . . It is like yeast, a ferment, a thing that moves and may move for a minute, an hour, a year, or a hundred years, but that in the end it will cease to move. The big eat the little that they may continue to move, the strong eat the weak that they may retain their strength. The lucky eat the most and move the longest, that is all.¹⁷⁰

No where in London's fiction is there a more concise proclamation of his approach to life. Thus, London's philosophy is that of

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 34.

¹⁶⁹ Gordon Mills, "Jack London's Quest for Salvation," American Quarterly, 7 (Spring 1955), 13.

¹⁷⁰ The Sea Wolf, 35.

the Sea Wolf.¹⁷¹

Van Weyden's reaction to this philosophy is to point out the utter hopelessness of such an existence. Echoing a motif which is recurrent throughout London's fiction, Larsen asserts that life itself is the end for existence. "We want to live and move, though we have no reason to, because it happens that it is the nature of life to live and move, to want to live and move."¹⁷² Then, when Van Weyden charges that Larsen makes a mockery of life, the Sea Wolf answers: "Life? Bah! It has no value. Of cheap things it is the cheapest. . . life eats life till the strongest and most piggish life is left. . . the only value life has is what life puts upon itself."¹⁷³

The ethics of Larsen are startlingly and totally incomprehensible to Van Weyden. "Might is right, and that is all there is to it. Weakness is wrong. . . it is pleasurable to be strong, because of the profits; painful to be weak because of the penalties."¹⁷⁴ This concept is very near the "I LIKE" philosophy which London admittedly lived by. In fact, Larsen mouths London's ideas in a discussion with Maud Brewster: "As I see it, a man does things because of desire. He has many desires. He may desire to escape pain, or to enjoy pleasure. But whatever he does, he does because he desires to do it."¹⁷⁵ There are overtones

¹⁷¹ Wilfrid Lay, "'John Barleycorn' Under Psychoanalysis," Bookman, 45(1917), 51.

¹⁷² The Sea Wolf, 37.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 48.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 55.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 169.

here, as with London's "I LIKE" philosophy, of justification for sexual unorthodoxy.

Under pressure from Van Weyden, the Sea Wolf admits that besides self-preservation, man must consider two further factors. "First a man must act for his own benefit; to do this is to be moral and good. Next he must act for the benefit of his children. And third, he must act for the benefit of his race."¹⁷⁶ At this point, Van Weyden, the product of the twentieth century, chimes in: "And the highest, finest, right conduct is that act which benefits at the same time the man, his children, and his race."¹⁷⁷ Thus, we find incorporated into the philosophical framework of the novel one of London's favorite themes--the sanctity of progeny and the glorification of race. Certainly the idea of Nordic superiority is implied throughout The Sea Wolf by the characterization of Larsen as the all-conquering Viking from the north.

Speaking through Van Weyden, London hastened to point out that the Sea Wolf was not an immoral man, but that he was amoral. "I remarked the total lack of viciousness, or wickedness, or sinfulness, in his face. It was the face, I am convinced, of a man who did no wrong."¹⁷⁸ Van Weyden gradually begins to admire the atavism of Larsen and to openly patronize this primordial brutality. The Sea Wolf is completely absolved because he is "a man so purely primitive that he was of the type that came into

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 56.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 68.

the world before the development of the moral nature. He was not immoral, but merely unmoral.¹⁷⁹ Thus, in exactly the same way as London justified his own desires and ambitions, he exonerated Wolf Larsen's brutality, lust, and greed.

A final comment must be made about the inconsistencies between London's intended meaning (if we take his word for it) of The Sea Wolf and the message which in fact comes through. In the end, after Larsen falls prey to the mysterious disease, one would expect Van Weyden to shine forth as the example of the victory of civilization, love, and morality over atavism, Darwinism and amorality. This is not at all the case. On the contrary, the gentle scholar reverts to the primitive and accepts in toto the Sea Wolf's philosophy. At the end of the novel, the blind and dying Larsen forbids Van Weyden to rebuild the "Ghost." The reply is predictable: "You forget. . . You are no longer the biggest bit of the ferment. You were, once, and able to eat me. . . but there has been a diminishing and I am now able to eat you."¹⁸⁰ In the end, Van Weyden has the opportunity to kill the Sea Wolf, but finds he can not--not due to moral considerations for another human, but due to the necessity to preserve their race.¹⁸¹

Finally, Wolf Larsen dies. It is significant to note that he does not die at the hands of his adversaries--neither Van Weyden, the crew, nor nature itself. He is destroyed by some

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 220.

¹⁸¹ Review of The Sea Wolf, by Jack London, The Independent, 58(Jan. 5, 1905), 39.

secret malady, presumably a brain tumor. London failed miserably if he sincerely wanted to demonstrate that the superman cannot be successful in modern life. In no way is it shown through the movement of the novel that the Sea Wolf (and all he stands for) is destroyed by social forces at work in the plot. His fall comes as the result of something unknown and adventitious which could hardly be shown to represent society's hostility to his kind.¹⁸² On the contrary, the power and mystery of his personality pervades the structure of the novel to his very last breath.

The idea that Wolf Larsen was Jack London's conception of the Nietzschean superman is widely bandied about. In the first critical response to The Sea Wolf the mood was set. The Independent magazine early in 1905, noted: "Wolf Larsen is a typical Superman, the great blond beast of Nietzsche. . . no mere symbol, but very much alive."¹⁸³ In the novel itself, London never mentions the word "superman" and mentions Nietzsche only casually in the first paragraph of the book: "he loafed through the winter months and read Nietzsche and Schopenhauer to rest his brain."¹⁸⁴ It was not until the last years of his life that London claimed The Sea Wolf was an attack on Nietzsche.

Most commentators, however, indicate that London conceived the character of Wolf Larsen before he had any extensive knowledge of Nietzsche's superman.¹⁸⁵ It can probably be concluded that

¹⁸² Walcott, 105.

¹⁸³ The Independent, 58: 39.

¹⁸⁴ The Sea Wolf, 1.

¹⁸⁵ See, for example, Walcott, p. 105 and Joan London, p. 209.

London first became acquainted with Nietzsche's works sometime in 1905, because thereafter he mentions the philosopher's name at every opportunity in his fiction.

As a novel, The Sea Wolf is as schizoid as was its author. The first half is powerful and captivating, one of the best sea stories of American fiction, and an example of the best work London ever produced. The second half is for the most part a ludicrous reversion to Victorian proprieties and frivolities. The novel is significant to this study because the characterization of Wolf Larsen provides greater insights into London's personality than does any other of his fictional works. It is all there--rampant individualism, materialism, racial superiority, narcissism, brutality, and violence. The Sea Wolf provides an appropriate introduction for the study of The Iron Heel and Martin Eden. Clearly, Wolf Larsen was London's first great autobiographical character (human character) and the philosophy of the Sea Wolf was the philosophy of the author.

The Iron Heel

Of the vast amount of socialist propaganda which London turned out during his career, The Iron Heel is the only example still in print and widely read. It is truly a remarkable novel, a key work among London's fiction, and one of the classics of American radicalism. The Iron Heel is important in this study for two reasons. In the first place it is the best source for an investigation of the romantic allure which the socialist cause held for London. Secondly, there are a number of striking

similarities between the leader of the socialist revolution-- Ernest Everhard--and Wolf Larsen. This second point, of course, implies that Ernest Everhard, like Wolf Larsen, is another of London's romanticized autobiographical characters.¹⁸⁶

The Iron Heel is the story of the inevitable class conflict in America between the socialist movement and the capitalist oligarchy. The leader of the cause, Everhard, comes to dominate the novel, personifying in a composite sense the whole movement, and thereby nearly blotting it out. The narrative is delivered from a diary written by Everhard's wife. The presentation is such that the reader assumes the diary has been discovered and resurrected at some far distant date after the fall of the oligarchy and the rise of the "Brotherhood of Man." Presumably some scholar of this new society has edited the diary and regards it as a historical document which necessitates numerous footnotes to clarify such archaic terms as "peddlers," "the Mayflower," "cut-rates," and "patent medicine."

As a novel, The Iron Heel had some obvious faults. While the fiction is aimed at documenting the imminent class conflict, it becomes bogged down in the characterization of Everhard as the hero of the movement.¹⁸⁷ The love affair between Everhard and his wife, Avis, is unsatisfactory due to the unbelievable proprieties with which it is burdened. As a device for attacking twentieth century American society, the footnotes, ostensibly inserted by the scholar of the future with all-knowing hindsight, actually detract from the work. They too often appear forced and

¹⁸⁶Pattee, 130.

¹⁸⁷C. H. Gratten, "Jack London," The Bookman, 68 (February, 1929), 669.

actually comical (though included by London with all seriousness).

The Iron Heel is, however, unique among London's works. It is a sort of anti-utopia. As such, it was among the first of a new line which included Aldous Huxley's Brave New World and George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four.¹⁸⁸ To a certain extent, by stepping completely outside his own age and describing its characteristics as being shockingly primitive, London employed an effective literary device. Through this medium he outlined the whole course of the class revolution. Most of his predictions have proven incorrect, but The Iron Heel is notable for the things London did accurately foresee.¹⁸⁹

The story follows the rise of Ernest Everhard as he ascends the ranks of the socialist movement. Through the eyes of his wife, we watch Everhard clearly interpret the fallacies of the capitalist economic system and foresee the rise of an oligarchy which destroys the middle-class and attempts to crush the socialists. The socialists first try to achieve power through democratic elections and Everhard is elected to Congress along with a number of his comrades. They discover, however, that the capitalists, determined not to hand over the reins of government, have conspired to form a militant oligarchy.

At this point in the story, Everhard realizes that this conflict between the classes can only be resolved by violent revolution. He assumes the responsibility for organizing the "Fighting Groups" which compose the core of the revolutionary movement. The story follows the preparation for the first revolt

¹⁸⁸ Geismer, 163.

¹⁸⁹ T. K. Whipple, Study Out the Land (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1943), 102.

until it is decisively put down by the oligarchy. During this brief uprising Everhard and his wife are separated and each experiences the most extreme dangers imaginable. They are, however, reunited at the point where the narrative is abruptly broken off. From the footnotes, we are informed that Everhard is eventually executed by the oligarchy, but the revolution goes on for three hundred years until the "Brotherhood of Man" is finally established.

As a socialist indictment of the American capitalist society. The Iron Heel is brilliant in places. London recognized the power that corporation lawyers would exercise. He repeatedly identified the combines and the trusts as the true enemies of not only the working class, but of the middle class as well. Carefully following Marxist doctrine, London explained the inevitability of imperialism as being the result of capitalist economy. He then dramatically demonstrated how wars between imperialist nations could be averted when organized labor on both sides refused to participate.

Certainly the most notable prophecy in The Iron Heel was London's description of the development of an oligarchy. The similarities between London's conception of oligarchy and the fascist conspiracy which became a reality in Germany during the 1930's are startling. In their quest for absolute control, the oligarchs instigate a bomb explosion in Congress in order to blame the socialists and arrest them. This incident is a frightening parallel to the Reichstag Fire under Hitler which paved the way for the Nazi reign of terror. A number of other similar-

ties may also be noted. London foresaw a passport system as a means of controlling the movement of society. He predicted the sudden and unexplained disappearance of people, the secret agents and double agents hidden throughout society, the "Mercenaries" (like Hitler's Stormtroopers), and scientific processes for molding the thought patterns of whole nations. These were all horrors which London foresaw under the oligarchy and they became realities in Hitler's Germany. It is obvious, however, that much the same sort of society resulted from Stalin's communist regime in Russia. Such a turn of events was the kind of risk which a self-appointed prophet like London had to be prepared to take.

Upon publication, The Iron Heel met instant derision by a majority of the critics. London had anticipated that the revolutionary novel would receive a blistering by the establishment press, but he was unprepared for its hostile reception by the socialist movement. The International Socialist Review expressed the reaction of the majority of London's socialist comrades: " [The Iron Heel] is well calculated to repel many whose addition to our forces is sorely needed; it gives a new impetus to the old and generally discarded cataclysmic theory; it tends to weaken the political Socialist movement by discrediting the ballot and to encourage the reactionary notion of physical force, so alluring to a certain type of mind."¹⁹⁰

London, of course, was very pained by this hostile socialist reception to what he considered a great contribution to their cause. The same article in The International Socialist Review

190Foner, 96.

admitted that the novel was "an ingenious and stirring romance."¹⁹¹ Quite possibly, this response from the socialist movement in the United States touched closely to the basic enigma which characterized all of London's efforts on behalf of the working class. In the first place, his approach was totally romantic. Secondly, his attraction to physical force and violence took him across the political spectrum to his more comfortable recline in the reactionary mold.

Romantic that he was, London could not resist writing his own self-image into the hero's role of The Iron Heel. Ernest Everhard was the revolutionist the author would liked to have been, had he not also desired to be a novelist, adventurer, intellectual, and landed gentleman.¹⁹² Everhard strides across the pages of The Iron Heel slaying his foes with both his intellect and brute strength. In the grand London style, Everhard is the cunning and powerful wolf which leads the inferior pack of dogs. Life under the Iron Heel was, indeed, "the terrible wolf struggle of those centuries."¹⁹³

In her description of her husband, Avis Everhard is obviously mouthing the words London longed to hear from his own wife, Charmian. "His neck was the neck of a prize-fighter, thick and strong. . . . He was a natural aristocrat--and this in spite of the fact that he was in the camp of the non-aristocrats. He was a superman, a blond beast such as Nietzsche has described."¹⁹⁴ This idea that Everhard

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Joan London, 307.

¹⁹³ The Iron Heel, 50.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 7.

is somehow different--presumably by blood--from his socialist comrades pervades the whole novel. Though Avis admits that Everhard was born in the working class, she goes on to assure the reader that "he was a descendent of the old line of Everhards that for over two hundred years had lived in America."¹⁹⁵ It seems that it was only the utmost restraint which prevented London from describing his hero as a Nordic stroming down from the north. Indeed, Avis does confide that her husband, "what with his broad shoulders and kingly head. . . looked magnificent."¹⁹⁶

But as with Wolf Larsen, London endowed the hero of The Iron Heel with more than superb physical attributes. Everhard was also a dynamic intellectual. Upon being confronted by a whole group of philosophers and ministers who represent the establishment, Everhard soundly puts them down by the pure force of his reasoning. Avis relates the devastation:

I can hear him now, with that war note in his voice, flaying them with his facts, each fact a lash that stung and stung again. And he was merciless. He took no quarter, and he gave none. I can never forget the flaying he gave them.¹⁹⁷

But through the course of the story, we find that Everhard is more than just a clear thinker. He gradually becomes the total prophet. His interpretations of the capitalist system and the evolution of the oligarchy prove faultless. In fact, the characterization of Everhard leads the reader to believe that, not only is

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 23.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 66.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 18.

he always right, but he alone has the pipeline to Truth, and his comrades are constantly wrong. "Ernest pinned his faith in Revolution. In this he was in advance of his party. His fellow socialists could not agree with him. . . they were stirred by him, but they were too sure of their own strength."¹⁹⁸ Everhard was, of course, correct and his attitude toward his comrades is that of a parent toward undisciplined children.

The parent-child analogy between Everhard and the socialist movement follows an interesting development. To London, his hero was the maximum leader of the revolution, not only in the political sense, but in the spiritual sense as well. In this role, Everhard evolves to the extreme of becoming the Christ-image:

Ernest arose before me transfigured, the apostle of truth, with shining brows and the fearlessness of one of God's own angels, battling for the truth and the right, and battling for the succor of the poor and lonely and oppressed. And then there arose before me another figure, the Christ! He, too, had taken the part of the lowly and oppressed, and against all the established power of priest and pharisee. And I remembered his end upon the cross, and my heart contracted with a pang as I thought of Ernest. Was he, too, destined for a cross?--he, with his clarion call and war-noted voice, and all the fine man's vigor of him!¹⁹⁹

The comparison that London made between Christ and Everhard is obvious. But it carries something of a shock with it, coming from the avowed atheist and materialist which London claimed to be. It seems that London's Christ-image is similar to Time magazine's description of Billy Graham's "Rippling muscled Christ who resembles Charles Atlas with a halo."²⁰⁰ This all reinforces

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 150.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 54.

²⁰⁰ Time Magazine, 60(November 17, 1952), 47.

the idea that London's fictional heroes, whether they are cast as sea captains, revolutionists or the Son of God, are all projections of the author's self-image. The fact that Everhard's role in The Iron Heel is that of a socialist oracle and revolutionist in no way prevents him from being the typical London hero--individualist, superman, and intellectual.

There are several other themes which contribute to the characterization of Everhard and are consistent with London's fiction. Everhard is, of course, the typical Horatio Alger type who has struggled up from the bottom of the social pit to a position of respectability.

At ten years of age he had gone to work in the mills, and later served his apprenticeship and became a horseshoer. He was self-educated, had taught himself German and French, and at that time was earning a meager living by translating scientific and philosophical works for a struggling socialist publishing house in Chicago. Also, his earnings were added to by the royalties from the sales of his own economic and philosophic works.²⁰¹

London also manages to work into this novel some hints of his racial prejudice. He warns his comrades that their long-sought "Brotherhood of Man" will be threatened by the Yellow Peril of the East. "The cry in all Asia was, 'Asia for the Asiatics!' And behind this cry was Japan, ever urging and aiding the yellow and brown races against the white."²⁰² It is rather a twisted theme to incorporate into a socialist novel.

Throughout the whole of The Iron Heel there is the ever-present theme of violence and brutality. The potential strength

²⁰¹ The Iron Heel, 24.

²⁰² Ibid., 199.

of a united working class provided part of London's romantic attraction to the socialist movement. But in his own society as well as in The Iron Heel, London could never quite envisage a dynamic realization of this working class strength. He knew his own strength, however, and could only conceive of a truly revolutionary socialist movement in the form of himself, or of his self-image--Everhard. It was always Everhard, and not a united socialist front, that stood up to the capitalists. "He extended from his splendid shoulders his two great arms, and the horseshoer's hands were clutching the air like eagle's talons. He was the spirit of regnant labor as he stood there, his hands outreaching to rend and crush his audience."²⁰³

One of the real ironies of The Iron Heel is that as London developed the hated oligarchy, he endowed it with such strength, vigor, and brutality that he must have suppressed his admiration for the finished product. The oligarchy, to a much greater degree than the socialist movement, possessed those qualities which London so admired. A spokesman for the oligarchy answers the socialists' demands in words that must have thrilled London as he penned them:

In the roar of shell and shrapnel and in whine of machine guns will our answer be couched. We will grind you revolutionists under our heel, and we shall walk upon your faces. The world is ours, we are its lords, and ours it shall remain. . . those that come after us have the power. There is the word. It is the king of words--Power. Not God, not mammon, but Power. Pour it over your tongue till it tingles with it. Power.²⁰⁴

203 Ibid., 73.

204 Ibid., 83.

There is also the atmosphere of violence which pervades the whole of the novel. This was the quality which so frightened the socialist press of America upon the publication of The Iron Heel. The brutality which characterizes the conflict between the revolutionists and the oligarchy is graphic enough. "It was warfare dark and devious, replete with intrigue and conspiracy, plot and counterplot. And behind it all, ever menacing, was death, violent and terrible."²⁰⁵ London, however, went on to describe the subterranean execution of traitors by drumhead courts of revolutionary justice. "The one thing we could not afford to fail in was the punishment of our own traitors. . . . In fact, so terrible did we make ourselves, that it became a greater peril to betray us than to remain loyal to us."²⁰⁶ All this London foresaw, and excused as born of revolutionary necessity--a grim reminder of how the slogan would be used to rationalize terrorism in the twentieth century.

The closing sections of The Iron Heel deal with the abortive revolt. In this defeat, London demonstrates some sympathy for Everhard, the leader, but has very little good to say for the working class masses as they rise in revolt. He characterizes the masses as a "Roaring Abysmal Beast," with only the aim of destruction in mind and powerless to serve any purpose other than that of providing cannon-fodder for the Mercenaries.²⁰⁷ In short, the mass of work-slaves is pictured as a headless monster, capable

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 213.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 214.

²⁰⁷ Foner, 95.

only of blindly thrashing about. By direct contrast, he shows an open admiration for the efficiency of the capitalist masters:

And through it all, with a serenity and certitude that was terrifying, continued to rise the form of that monster of the ages, the Oligarchy. With iron hand and iron heel it mastered the surging millions, out of confusion brought order, out of ^{the} very chaos wrought its own foundation and structure.²⁰⁸

Thus, though he preached the glory of the socialist revolution, London's distaste for the masses and his enthusiasm for the organization and discipline of the oligarchy showed through. It is significant to note that in The Iron Heel the "Brotherhood of Man" did not come about during Everhard's life time. Its realization is indicated only in the footnotes. This strongly suggests that London could not really visualize the arrival of a socialist society during his own time, due to his lack of faith in the socialist movement.

The Iron Heel is interspersed with liberal doses of Marxism, but the most vivid and memorable characteristic is the description of the hero, Ernest Everhard. Throughout the constant warfare, both intellectual and physical, Everhard strides ever forth as the leader, head and shoulders above the crowd of puny working class degenerates who follow and deify him.

Martin Eden

It has been made explicit in this study that London's major fictional heroes are to a great degree autobiographical. Certainly it has been shown that this is the case with Wolf

²⁰⁸The Iron Heel, 202.

Larsen and Ernest Everhard. In a number of ways, there are great similarities between the London hero model as noted in The Sea Wolf and in The Iron Heel. The same holds true for London's self-acclaimed fictional autobiography--Martin Eden.

There are, however, certain problems which arise because London did consciously create Martin Eden as an autobiographical character. In many ways, however, Martin Eden is less autobiographical than either Wolf Larsen or Ernest Everhard. London wrote too eloquently of how he felt and changed too much of what he actually did. "A man may shine, autobiographically speaking, as great and good, and yet have a very commonplace life record, which falls far behind his autoideolization."²⁰⁹ Thus it seems best to accept Martin Eden not as a real history, but as an earnest and truthful record of what London would have been, had he not been limited by his own weaknesses.

With hindsight, most commentators maintain that Martin Eden was one of London's most powerful novels.²¹⁰ There are weak parts (particularly the conclusion), but on the whole it is sustained and effective. Upon publication, the novel was met with generally disapproving reviews. The establishment press rather unanimously condemned it as another of London's socialist propaganda tracts. The socialist press, however, soundly accused the undisciplined author of a further glorification of individualism.

²⁰⁹Review of Martin Eden, by Jack London, The Independent, 67(Oct. 28, 1909), 980.

²¹⁰See, for example, the references in Geismar, Foner, O'Conner, and Joan London.

There was one characteristic of Martin Eden which reviewers from both sides of the political spectrum agreed upon. They credited London with his earlier successes in depicting the lust of battle and the violence of nature. But nearly all the critics condemned London's attempt to describe the more delicate processes of a man's reasoning or a woman's heart. "His occasional attempts to portray the finer, higher types of men and women result not in real people, not even in caricatures, but simply in lay figures, puppets from which not blood but sawdust would exude, should we pierce the surface."²¹¹ It is this lack of comprehension for his own limitations which looms as London's most conspicuous fault in Martin Eden.

If Martin Eden was not well received among the critics and reading public, it became a guidebook, inspiration, justification and Sacred Writ to young writers who followed London. It was widely accepted as the writer's version of the Horatio Alger fable with a bitter twist at the end. By its attack upon the incompetence and inhumanity of magazine editors and literary critics, Martin Eden was a soothing balm for the ruffled egos of many frustrated writers. If nothing else, it is the story of the eternal conflict between hard-headed editors and inspired writers, both directed by self-interest.

Basically the plot structure of Martin Eden is simple enough. The scenes are set in and about London's old stomping grounds of Oakland, California. The theme is one of London's favorites: the attempt of a rude, uncouth, and ignorant man to civilize and

²¹¹Frederic Tabor Cooper, "Primordialism and Some Recent Books," The Bookman, 30(Nov., 1909), 279.

educate himself. In this case, the hero meets a young woman who symbolizes all the graciousness and goodness of middle class society. London characterizes the unfinished (and untainted) Martin Eden as a sailor whose destiny hitherto has been aimlessly adrift around the world, from port to port with "no ambitions, no standards, no definite scheme of life, companioned by vile man and viler women."²¹²

The young hero is introduced to the parlor floor of society--the Morse home--after he has employed his native talent for street fighting in order to rescue Arthur Morse, a university student. Morse invites Eden to dinner and he meets the sister, Ruth. The sailor and street ruffian immediately falls in love with Ruth Morse and all she represents--the gracious prosperity and politeness of middle class life. To Eden, Ruth "was a pale, ethereal creature, with wide, spiritual blue eyes and a wealth of golden hair. . . she was a spirit, a divinity, a goddess; such sublimated beauty was not of the earth."²¹³ He was immediately mastered by the desire to reach her in the scale of society.

This one evening in the environment of the Morse home and in the presence of Ruth Morse baptized Martin Eden with the water of ambition. His determination to fit himself to become her mate changes his whole outlook on life. His new life is charged with the enthusiasm of a young superman who has determined to better himself through education. In the grand London tradition, it is a mighty, bull-necked, muscular struggle to acquire all-knowledge

²¹²Ibid.

²¹³Martin Eden, 4.

all at once. The sailor-sweat stands out on him in the public library as he tries to conquer Darwin, Haeckel, and Spencer.

Martin Eden's studies soon lead him to his particular clue to the life and mystery of things. Biology becomes his source, "First Principles" his bible, and Herbert Spencer his prophet. The explanation of nature and society based upon the sole criterion of strength greatly appeals to Eden's own sense of power. His supreme confidence to win out against all odds reflects his tenacity born only of supreme self-assurance. Previously his abilities had manifested themselves in terms of physical strength. Now his determination to better himself in order to win (and deserve) the love of Ruth Morse directs him toward adding another dimension--that of the mind.

All this time Ruth's relation to Eden is that of a prim school-marm trying to guide a young bull through society, according to the best rules of the middle class. Though he totally submits himself to Ruth (he even gives up cigarettes for her), the hero is also profoundly influenced by Herbert Spencer. The conflict which results is ostensibly between Ruth's sense of propriety and Spencer's message of realism and materialism. Actually, it is a case of Ruth Morse and Martin Eden being unable and unwilling to reach each other on the spiritual plane.

Eden's education leads him to the conclusion that he has great thoughts within himself and that he must write. The reader is given to understand that the hero is bursting with ideas, but he also sees a writing career as a short cut to wealth and respectability. As an aspiring writer, Martin Eden goes at it

with the muscular vehemence characteristic of Jack London. The middle chapters of the novel contain the hero's struggle with editors, with the disapproval of Ruth to whom he is now engaged, and with lack of faith in him on all sides. He starves and endures great hardships, but his optimism allows him to perform prodigious tasks with the pen. Though he maintains complete confidence in himself, he displays a "snarling rebellion against the slowness of his progress which leaves upon the reader's mind the impression of a prolonged whine."²¹⁴

Once Martin Eden becomes well-launched on the path toward success, he begins to see through the shallow bourgeois hypocrisy of the Morse family. He also realizes that Ruth has certain intellectual and human inadequacies. This discovery serves only to increase the physical attraction which they share for each other. Their engagement comes as a shock to Mr. and Mrs. Morse, but the parents restrain themselves in hopes that Ruth will come to her senses and end the affair.

One of the greatest sources of frustration for the hero is the lack of sympathy and encouragement which Ruth gives him in his efforts to be a writer. On numerous occasions he reads her his work, but she is totally unable to evaluate its quality. She recognizes the power of his writing, but not the beauty of his realism. In fact, Eden's attempts at beauty in realism provoked from her such indignant comments as "degrading" and "nasty." The break between the lovers is the result of Eden's persistent refusal to surrender his literary ambitions and take a job. Just

²¹⁴Cooper, 280.

as he is on the verge of becoming a successful writer, Ruth yields to social pressure and breaks the engagement.

Throughout the novel, Martin Eden maintains his faith in individualism and his worship of Spencer. He occasionally attends socialist meetings, but his most profound confrontation with socialism is his association with Brissenden, a consumptive poet and cynic. Brissenden alone recognizes Eden's talents and tries to convert him to the socialist movement. His relationship with the poet seems to fill some of the void left by Ruth's refusal to see him. Then, Brissenden succumbs to his chronic ailment and Martin Eden is left adrift, alienated from his family and friends and still without that long-sought success.

At this point, one of his controversial essays enjoys a phenomenal success, and overnight Eden's name is on the lips of editors across the country. Overwhelmed with requests for material, the budding celebrity hurls back at the editors the stacks of manuscripts which they had previously rejected but this time accept. In the space of a few weeks he becomes wealthy even though he has written nothing new. He becomes obsessed with the rewards of "work performed." He had been degraded and humiliated while he worked sixteen hours a day over his writing, but when success finally arrives it means little to him.

His thoughts went around and around in a cycle. The center of that circle was "work performed"; it ate at his brain like a deathless maggot. . . Every affair of life around him that penetrated through his senses immediately related itself to "work performed." He drove along the path of restless logic that he was nobody, nothing. Mart Eden, the hoodlum, and Mart Eden, the sailor, had been real, had been he; but Martin Eden! the famous writer did

not exist.²¹⁵

In the end, his literary success makes accessible to him all that he had previously desired--money, security, respectability and Ruth Morse's love. But his disillusionment is complete. Life for Martin Eden is no longer worth the struggle. He refuses to write any more. In desperation, he decides to wind up his business affairs and to sail for the South Pacific. On board ship, the futility of his existence becomes overpowering and he seeks rest at the bottom of the sea. Martin Eden's suicide is an ominous portend of the way in which Jack London was to end his own life eight years later.

As a novel, Martin Eden is extremely forceful. As an autobiography, it is a failure. Wolf Larsen and Ernest Everhard are also autobiographical characters in London's fiction, but they are different. They represent the ideal man that London had always wanted to be. Martin Eden, a consciously created self-image, represents the ideal man that London thought he was. London must have been aware of the conflicts inherent in his life and fiction. In trying to resolve this conflict in the novel, Martin Eden, he only increased his own frustrations over the enigma. The very nebulous nature of the conclusion attests to this.

Apart from its autobiographical nature, Martin Eden is one of the angry books of American literature. It is very much in the manner of Richard Wright's Black Boy.²¹⁶ As a desperate novel of apprenticeship, Martin Eden is a tragic native success story. But

²¹⁵ Martin Eden, 4.

²¹⁶ Geismar, 172.

an aura of mystery still surrounds London's central theme. Was it an epic story of the proletarian struggle, or a case history of social and human pathology? The truth is that it is epic and paranoid at once.²¹⁷ London, of course, claimed otherwise. In 1915, he wrote: "Lots of people read The Sea Wolf, no one discovered that it was an attack upon the super-man philosophy. Later on. . . I wrote another novel that was an attack upon the super-man idea, namely my Martin Eden. Nobody discovered that this was such an attack."²¹⁸ The reader can hardly be blamed for missing London's message. It is inherent in the characterization of Martin Eden that he is a rampant individualist, stampeding toward goals which are totally inconsistent with socialism.

As in The Sea Wolf and The Iron Heel, the hero of Martin Eden totally dominates the novel. The development of this central character consumed so much of the author's energy that he hardly bothered with the other personalities in the story. Indeed, the novel suffers because only Martin Eden comes to life.²¹⁹ The other persons are characterized only in terms of their inter-actions with the hero. Even Ruth Morse, the heroine turned deserter, is endowed with human qualities only in the first part of the novel. Once Eden loses his love for her she becomes little more than a mechanism of the plot.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Hendrick and Shepard, 463.

²¹⁹ Sam S. Basket, introduction to Martin Eden, by Jack London, (New York: Hoit, Rinehart and Winston, 1956), XVII.

London's characterization of Martin Eden as the total man--muscular, handsome, sexy, and primordial--is very similar to that of Wolf Larsen and Ernest Everhard. Through the eyes of Ruth, the reader is confronted with the typical London self-image: "Her gaze rested for a moment on the muscular neck, heavy corded, almost bull-like, bronzed by the sun, spilling over with rugged health and strength."²²⁰ To Ruth Morse, and to the reader as well, Martin Eden looms as a combination of civilized man and son of nature, miraculously combined in one organic being.

. . .she looked upon Martin Eden as a novelty . . .in similar ways she had experienced unusual feelings when she looked at wild animals in the menagerie, or when she witnessed a storm of wind, or shuddered at the bright-ribbed lightning. The blaze of tropic suns was in his face, and in his swelling resilient muscles was the primordial vigor of life.²²¹

Throughout the novel there is the latent suggestion of sex appeal. Eden regarded Ruth as such a delicate, beautiful thing, an "ethereal creature," that he could not conceive of a carnal relationship with her. Ruth, on the contrary, was very much attracted to the masculinity, the primordial vigor which she saw in the hero. It is by Ruth's initiation that their love enters the physical sphere: "Then arose in her the impulse to lean against him, to rest herself against his strength--a vague, half-formed impulse, which, even as she considered it, mastered her and made her lean toward him."²²²

London's fascination with his own body is constantly suggested

²²⁰ Martin Eden, 10.

²²¹ Ibid., 63.

²²² Ibid., 160.

by Martin Eden's relationship with Ruth Morse. It is his relationship, however, with the consumptive Brissenden which reveals the active narcissism in Martin Eden. After having nearly been strangled by Eden, Brissenden exclaims: "Ah, you young Greek! I wonder if you take just pride in that body of yours. You are devilishly strong. You are a young panther, a lion cub. Well, well, it is you who must pay for that strength."²²³ When asked what his last statement meant, Brissenden replies: "Because of the women. They will worry you until you die."²²⁴

There is another aspect in Martin Eden which shows London's preoccupation with himself. The hero is engaged in a never-ending process of self-evaluation. In so doing, he reveals another of London's personality quirks--his self-identification with the white man as a race of superior beings. This theme is latent in Martin Eden as compared to much of London's fiction. It does, however, come to the surface in places: "The brown sunburn of his face surprised him. He had not dreamed he was so black. He rolled up his shirt-sleeve and compared the white underside of his arm with his face. Yes, he was a white man, after all."²²⁵

As suggested in The Sea Wolf and The Iron Heel, London wrote his own success story into the characterization of his major heroes. In Martin Eden the Horatio Alger motif becomes the backbone of the plot structure. The story takes Eden from an ignorant

²²³ Ibid., 160.

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ Ibid., 32.

and impoverished sailor at the bottom of the social pit through his rise on the social scale to wealth, education, and something approximating respectability. During this struggle for the top, Eden's characterization is manifested by two different, though somewhat complimentary, motives: on the one hand, he has deep feelings of shame for his own origins in the working class; on the other hand, his ambition directs his efforts toward middle class aspirations.

While both of these motives ostensibly result from Eden's desire to reach Ruth Morse and to win her love, they are more directly the result of his own individuality and self-confidence. The hero most openly demonstrates the humiliation he feels as part of the working class when he compares his previous women with his idealization of Ruth. At his own level of society he sees

. . . the weak and sickly faces of the girls of the factories, and the simpering, boisterous girls from the south of Market. . . frowsy, shuffling creatures from the pavements of Whitechapel, gin-bloated hags of the stews, and all the vast hell's following of harpies, vile-mouthed and filthy, that under the guise of monstrous female form prey upon sailors, the scrapings of the ports, the scum and slime of the human pit.²²⁶

At the same time, Eden felt the taint of his own class. His own ambitions drove him upwards, but "he felt the fingers of his own class clutching at him to hold him down."²²⁷ This restraint made him all the more resentful of his humble origins.

Upon visiting the Morse home, however, his ambitions were

²²⁶ Ibid., 5.

²²⁷ Ibid., 45.

fired. "Here was intellectual life, he thought, and here was beauty, warm and wonderful as he had never dreamed it could be. He forgot himself and stared at her with hungry eyes. Here was something to live for, to win to, to fight for--ay, and die for."²²⁸ Martin Eden had seen his Shangri-La. What remained for him was to achieve it. At this point, his dynamic individuality and self-assurance take over. To Ruth, Eden says of her society: "I want it. I want it now. I want to breathe air like you get in this house--air that is filled with books, and pictures, and beautiful things, where people talk in low voices an' are clean, an' their thoughts are clean. The air I always breathed was mixed up with grub an' house rent an' scrappin' an' booze an' that's all they talked about, too."²²⁹

The drama of the novel is Martin Eden's tenacity in pursuit of his goal. The tone of his struggle is set early: "I'm just as good as them, and if they do know lots that I don't, I could learn 'm a few myself, all the same."²³⁰ During the early stages of his struggle, Eden consoles himself by noting his physical superiority: "He grew conscious of the muscled mechanism of his body and felt confident that he was physically their master."²³¹ He soon becomes conscious of his ability to learn. He acquires a

²²⁸ Ibid., 8.

²²⁹ Ibid., 56.

²³⁰ Ibid., 15.

²³¹ Ibid., 25.

supreme confidence. No longer the humble working class aspirant, he has become the invincible young superman. "It's up to me to make good. I will be the man. I will make myself the man. I will make good."²³²

As Martin Eden begins to taste the fruits of education, he discovers various political philosophies. He also frequents socialist meetings. He is at first baffled by Marx, Ricardo, Adam Smith, and Mill. Then, he finds Herbert Spencer, his light and guiding star. Quite obviously, Spencerianism was immediately comprehensible to Martin Eden because it provided the total justification for his raison d'etre. It fed his individualism and fired his own self-confidence.

He was drunken with comprehension. At night, asleep, he lived with the gods in colossal nightmare; and awake, in the day, he went around. . .gazing upon the world he had just discovered. . .At table he failed to hear the conversation about petty and ignoble things, his eager mind seeking out and following cause and effect in everything before him. In the meat on the platter he saw the shining sun and traced its energy back through all its transformations to its source a hundred million miles away, or traced its energy ahead to the moving muscles in his arms that enabled him to cut the meat, and to the brain wherewith he willed the muscles to move to cut the meat, until with inward gaze, he saw the sun shining in his brain.²³³

This is Martin Eden's interpretation of Spencer. He makes it highly personalized and turns it inward to illuminate his abundant strength and capabilities. It was in this characterization of Martin Eden that London made his hero memorable. He comes alive as the spirit of youth endowed with magic gifts of fire, energy,

²³²Ibid., 92.

²³³Ibid., 100.

and optimism.

In view of Eden's ambitions and self-assurance, it is not surprising that he totally rejects the socialist movement. Throughout the novel, the socialists are portrayed as a "miserable mass of weaklings and inefficients who perish according to biological law on the ragged confines of life. They were unfit."²³⁴ Indeed, there are only two individuals from the socialist movement who are described in any detail. One is a clever Jew whose "stooped and narrow shoulders and weazened chest proclaimed him the true child of the crowded ghetto."²³⁵ The other is Martin Eden's admirer, Brissenden, whose socialism is extremely unorthodox.

Though Martin Eden is accused of being a socialist he actually abhorred the socialist philosophy. "As for myself, I am an individualist. I believe the race is to the swift, the battle to the strong. Such is the lesson I have learned from biology. . . I am an individualist and individualism is the hereditary and eternal foe of socialism."²³⁶ As in The Sea Wolf and The Iron Heel, London takes the characterization of his self-image past the normal limits of individualism and into the murky realm of anarchy. Confronted by the hypocrisy of the middle class for which he had struggled, Martin Eden cries out in frustration:

I am a reactionary--so complete a reactionary that my position is incomprehensible to you who live in a veiled

²³⁴ Ibid., 302.

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ Ibid., 237.

lie of social organization. . . Nietzsche was right. The world belongs to the strong--to the strong who are noble as well and who do not wallow in the swine-trough of trade and exchange. The world belongs to the true noblemen, to the great blond beasts, to the non-compromisers, to the 'yes-sayers.' And they will eat you up, you socialists who are afraid of socialism and who think yourselves individualists. . . There aren't half a dozen individualists in Oakland, but Martin Eden is one of them.²³⁷

This is the dominant theme throughout the novel. Any appeal for the socialist movement in Martin Eden was lost to London's enthusiasm for the portrayal of his hero as "the man on horseback." When Eden addresses a gathering of socialists on the inevitable defeat of the masses by the superior men of society, the socialists are given only a few unorganized sentences to reply. Even Brissenden's affirmation of socialism loses effectiveness because he is a physical weakling who cynically observes life from the sidelines and eventually kills himself to escape his infirmity. The weak cries of socialism that can be found provide poor competition for the strong, attractive Martin Eden who, by sheer force and ability, is overcoming his disadvantages of birth and circumstance.

A final observation about Martin Eden is London's characteristic theme of violence and brutality. Though it is more latent in this novel than in either The Sea Wolf or The Iron Heel, it provides, nevertheless, an incessant undertone to the narrative. The references to Martin Eden's strength as a source of violence are numerous. The most striking example of how violence is incorporated in the characterization of the hero is his extended bloody fight with Cheese-Face. The struggle is carried out over

²³⁷ Ibid., 297.

a period of several years. Finally, the two come together for one last fight to the finish.

It is obvious that London was trying to develop a direct analogy between Eden's physical victory over Cheese-Face and his conquest of the middle class. As with all his scenes of violence, London's narrative is vivid and dramatic. The fight is vicious and brutal. Toward the end, Cheese-Face looms up as "a bloody something before him that was not a face but a horror, an oscillating, hideous, gibbering, nameless thing."²³⁸ But finally the fight is over and Eden exalts: "I licked you, Cheese-Face! It took me eleven years, but I licked you."²³⁹

London concludes Martin Eden with the suicide of the hero. Critics differ widely as to what the last few pages of the novel and the suicide really mean. In any case, the critics are unanimous in rejecting the motif which London himself asserted. It is very hard to see this struggle for success and subsequent disillusionment as an indictment of individualism. This is mainly due to the fact that Martin Eden, the inspired, comes through much more credibly than does Martin Eden, the disillusioned.

Clearly, London has assigned his own personal chaos to his characters. Much the same is true of Wolf Larsen and Ernest Everhard. If London was really trying to indict individualism and to promote socialism, Martin Eden offers ample evidence of the author's schizoid personality. Though the novel was written when London was barely over thirty years old, it probably reflects

²³⁸ Ibid., 126.

²³⁹ Ibid., 127.

the boredom and despair which would eventually drive him to suicide.

Conclusion

Analyzed both individually and collectively, Jack London's three major novels--The Sea Wolf, The Iron Heel, and Martin Eden--provide valuable insights into the political nature of the author and of his fiction. Viewed individually, the three novels which were published in 1904, 1908, and 1909, respectively, represent definite trends in the development of the author. Taken collectively, the novels and their respective central characters reveal much of London's self-image and the enigma of his personality.

Structurally, each of the three novels is unique. The conflict between Wolf Larsen and Humphrey Van Weyden is dramatized within the confines of the schooner "Ghost." The Iron Heel is structurally different from any of London's other fiction. The drama of The Iron Heel revolves around the author's romantic characterization of Ernest Everhard as a maximum leader during the chaos of class conflict and revolution. Martin Eden, of course, derives its plot structure from London's own struggle out of the social pit to the heights of literary success.

While the plot structures of the three novels are different, there are several elements which seem inherent through this sampling of fiction. The most dominant, of course, is the characterization of London's fictional heroes. The number of similar physical and intellectual traits common among Wolf Larsen, Ernest Everhard, and Martin Eden is striking. As has been discussed in this chapter, each of the heroes is described as a near-perfect physical specimen.

They are all endowed with the rugged handsomeness and aristocratic superiority of the Nietzschean superman. They are all true intellectuals, as well, but only through the hard graft of self-education. Each is the embodiment of a Horatio Alger success story. In short, the three heroes provide an accurate composite of what London both wanted to be and thought he was--the total individualist, the superman on horseback.²⁴⁰

There are several other persistent themes which London employed in the three novels. The hero of each is quite obviously a self-glorification by the author. However, in each case the relationship between author and hero is something more. The central character is always standing around flexing his muscles and letting the author thrill to the touch as he translates to prose the fantastic masculinity and muscularity that he finds. Indeed, it seems a little too much when Wolf Larsen observes Van Weyden admiring his muscles and commands him, "Feel them."²⁴¹ Van Weyden reacts much as would Jack London looking in a mirror: "They were hard as iron. . . . muscles were softly crawling and shaping about the hips, along the back, and across the shoulders . . ."²⁴² In this respect, the guiding influence in London's life was not Marx, but Narcissus.²⁴³

The theme of racism has also been noted in the three novels.

²⁴⁰Lay, 49.

²⁴¹The Sea Wolf, 99.

²⁴²Ibid.

²⁴³Geismar, 191.

Though it is not so overt as in some of London's other fiction, it is broadly implied. In each case, the central character was described as a sort of blond, Nordic beast, innately superior to all the lesser peoples of the earth. The idea that this type of superior man is also an American is liberally implied in The Iron Heel and Martin Eden. Equally common among the three novels are the complimentary themes of violence and primordialism. The Sea Wolf and The Iron Heel are truly dominated by scenes of violence. Martin Eden, also, has a very marked undertone of violence and brutality. In each novel, the central figure emerges as the strongest of the strong, the most violent of the violent. Without exception, London seeks justification for his heroes' brutal instincts by characterizing them as primordial beings, thereby exempt from the restrictions of twentieth century society.

The three novels illustrate quite adequately that there is a political and social message in the fiction of Jack London. The three central characters--all semi-autobiographical heroes--dramatically illuminate rampant individualism which was manifested in both the author's life and in his fiction. It must be conceded that London sincerely believed that socialism was the visible solution for twentieth century society. Nevertheless, the message which was delivered by his fiction can only be interpreted as a glorification of individualism and a primitive lust for violence. The primordialism of his heroes epitomized London's rejection of the civilization which limited his own individualism. Martin Eden carried this motif to its extreme by rejecting the restrictions of life altogether, and sought escape and release in death.

CHAPTER VI

The Final Verdict

Quest for Fantasy

The life and fiction of Jack London provide an unlimited source of study. During his forty years, he lived a truly romantic adventure. Several of his literary efforts remain as fresh and exciting today as when he wrote them over fifty years ago. He was a product of his times and his fiction reveals the hopes, despairs, and illusions of his generation. This paper has been an attempt to evaluate London's fiction in the light of his life and times. In many respects, however, it has been impossible to completely disentangle the facts from London's fantasy of himself.

Certainly, London was a precocious boy with an excellent physique and a brilliant mind. As a man he was excessively sociable, generous, and likable. He was a potentially great man, but his possibilities for greatness were almost wholly lost to self-deception.²⁴⁴ His life was a double tragedy. Publicly, his fiction was never entirely satisfactory; privately, his own life ended in failure. "At the root of both lies the fantasy which ruled him--the regressive myth of the primitive, barbaric hero."²⁴⁵

²⁴⁴Whipple, 95.

²⁴⁵Ibid.

This is a myth which is, of course, universal with all boys. The child imagining himself as an outlaw, pirate, or frontiersman is not unique to any era or locale. It is part of the adolescent's resistance to growing up and becoming civilized. Most boys become men and put the myth behind them. But nearly all adults retain some attraction for the fantasy of the primitive hero. This is evidenced by the continuing popularity of London's fiction. The only thing that distinguishes London from other men is that he was ruled by the myth throughout his life. His constant need was to imagine himself as a swaggering lord of creation, and he strove to be the glorified superman. In such a role he had no use for civilized people. From his reading of Darwin, Spencer and Nietzsche he justified the self-image around which he created his major works.

London's personal tragedy sprang from his extraordinary combination of physical strength and personal awareness. Without such strength, he would have had to let the fantasy remain a fantasy. Without his awareness, he would not have driven himself to destruction by trying to realize an adolescent dream. His love for strength and violence drove him to seek the unattainable. He tried to express this dilemma in the fury of his fiction, but the effort demanded more than he could sustain. With the exception of The Call of the Wild, every novel he attempted begins powerfully, but falters somewhere near the middle. The same was true with his personal relationships. He was always intellectually disappointed by his associations with men, and sexually frustrated by his involvements with women. Even in his quest for a male heir he

was haunted by failure. The result of London's frustrations was his expression of power in terms of brutality, coercion, and destruction. He was incapable of expressing in positive terms the creation of human values. Thus, his intrinsic literary value was greatly diminished.²⁴⁶

Socialist or Superman?

In spite of his own inadequacies, London expressed the sympathies of his generation.²⁴⁷ The contradiction which haunted American society was manifested with particular clarity in his life and fiction. On the one hand, he was socially conscious; on the other, he was highly individualistic. With one breath he extolled the virtues of Marx, and with the next glorified the ideas of Nietzsche. He once claimed that Martin Eden died because he was an individualist, but in the end, London himself took the suicide route.

In retrospect, his socialism is a source of confusion. Throughout his life he struggled to rise out of the social pit. His fiction often revealed his outright contempt for the mentality and values of the working class. He was attracted to socialism not because he was a worker, but because he was rebellious, gregarious, and idealistic. Through Martin Eden, he admired the socialist arguments because they carried intellectual conviction. He was especially thrilled by the socialist movement because of its potential strength and the violence which it

²⁴⁶Pattee, 142.

²⁴⁷Ibid., 121.

threatened.²⁴⁸ This is manifested repeatedly in The Iron Heel.

That London was a complete individualist has been repeatedly illustrated in this paper. He was enthralled by life as a struggle for existence. He thrilled at the aspect of survival of the fittest. He read Darwin and Spencer as a justification for his personal quest for success and wealth. Throughout his fiction, he wrote his self-image into the characters of his major heroes. His three primitive heroes --- Wolf Larsen, Ernest Everhard, and Martin Eden---vividly illustrate London's narcissism. He was infatuated with his own muscular body and handsome face. He characterized himself in fiction as the aristocratic Nietzschean superman. He idealized the concept of the self-made man, who had fought his way to the top by the force of his own strength. Finally, London was titillated by the violence and brutality which his heroes (personified by Wolf Larsen) rained down upon the inferior creatures of society.²⁴⁹ His individualism was a kind of egomania which could only achieve satisfaction in self-destruction.

The other themes from London's fiction are simply logical conclusions of his individualism. As the product of a certain strain of men whose roots traced back to primordial Nordic ancestry, he saw himself as the prototype of the twentieth century Viking. While London assaulted the bastions of middle class society, the blond, blue-eyed giants of his fiction stormed down out of the North to subdue the inferior races

²⁴⁸Kazin, 86.

²⁴⁹Graham, 56.

of the earth. With Kipling, he shared the dream of Anglo-Saxon supremacy over black, brown, and yellow peoples. The logical conclusion of such extreme individualism, as a part of a racial doctrine, is the emergence of a leader. This leadership principle is implied throughout London's fiction, but it is most clearly articulated in Ernest Everhard's role as the maximum leader in The Iron Heel.

The Ultimate Legacy

There are, of course, the obvious similarities between the underlying concepts of London's fiction and the fundamentals of twentieth century fascism.²⁵⁰ London claimed to be a socialist, but in his life and fiction he evolved many of the myths which were to become fascist doctrine. The most striking of these are his concepts of Social Darwinism, Nietzscheanism, racism, and imperialism.

There is, however, a more significant relationship between London and the fascist movement. It is more accurate to see London as a product of the lower middle class, than as a member of the proletariat. His family never faced the utter hopelessness of the social pit, and London's experience as a member of the working class was limited. His aspirations to climb through the middle class were born not so much of hunger as of the desire for respectability and security.

It is obvious that his fiction was not oriented to the

²⁵⁰ As a source for twentieth century fascism, I have relied heavily on George H. Sabine, A History of Political Theory (3rd.: New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1961), 893-914.

working class. Rather he unconsciously became the foremost spokesman of the lower middle class. Had a census of his most avid readers been available, it would have shown the majority to be of the white-collar group.²⁵¹ His fiction offered perfect vicarious satisfaction to those struggling to keep up appearances and maintain a precarious status. His heroic fantasy was the compensatory myth of these people, and his recurrent Horatio Alger ethic offered them hope. But most importantly, London's turning of power to violence--fighting, coercion, and destruction--was the specialty of the lower middle class in its sporadic reversions to savagery. Even the glorification of race appealed to white-collar workers, for they were hard put to maintain self-respect. Thus, the American lower middle class which idolized London was not significantly different from that group in German society which provided the rank and file of the Nazi movement.

To say that London, at the time of his death, was headed toward a philosophy which coincided with fascism may be an over-statement. There are indications, however, that he was thoroughly disillusioned with the socialist movement and somewhat skeptical of the logic of democratic government. Certainly his self-image and his infatuation with Nietzsche had led him to totally reject human equality as a political principle. Moreover, his belief in the inherent superiority of certain individuals in society must have disposed him toward the idea of concentration of power in the hands of one man. This type of individual he

²⁵¹ Whipple, 101.

would have characterized as a Wolf Larsen, Ernest Everhard, or Martin Eden. As for nationalism, London was, by all rights, an ultra-nationalist. He foresaw the transformation of the Anglo-Saxon race in the New World environment into a nation more powerful than any other on earth.

Had London lived into the 1920's and 1930's, it is possible only to speculate on his reaction to the rise of communist totalitarianism in Russia and fascist totalitarianism in Germany. It seems obvious, however, that his basic philosophy would have led him to the German model. His rejection of democracy at the end of his life is evidenced by a short story, "The Bones of Kahekili,"²⁵² which he wrote only five months before his death:

'I will answer you,' said Hardman Pool. 'It is because most men are fools that we, your chiefs, think for you all days and for days ahead.'²⁵³

But his attraction to fascism is purely speculative. Like the Nazis, London had no use for weaklings. He subscribed to a philosophy which dictated the inexorable triumph of the strong over the weak. But most importantly, London idolized power as the supreme test of human values. During his life he produced over fifty books and several short stories. Underlying this mass of fiction, London left a psychological legacy which found fulfillment in fascist Germany, rather than in either the American or the Russian systems.

²⁵²Collected in On the Makaloa Mat, published in 1919.

²⁵³Jack London, On the Makaloa Mat (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1919), 17.

Political Fiction: Hindsight and Prospects

This paper has dealt almost in its entirety with an interpretation of Jack London and his fiction. It has, however, been consciously prepared to demonstrate one method by which political fiction can be analyzed and evaluated. As a model for the study of political fiction, this paper reveals several significant factors about the relevance of fiction to the study of politics. In the first place, it indicates the importance of fiction as a method for communicating political ideas. London was a very popular, widely-read author. His fiction expresses political convictions which are not readily available in any of his public statements or in any of the many biographies of him. He was an extremely nationalistic person and felt the newly emerging assertiveness of the American character at the turn of the century. He was a contemporary of Theodore Roosevelt and shared the President's belief in American superiority. By expressing these factors in his fiction, London was reflecting this new American enthusiasm as well as inciting it.

Such evidence is as near as the nearest library. That London's fiction communicates these insights is proof of the value of political fiction. It transcends textbooks and scientific terminology in expressing the conceptual relationships between ideas and experience. As Wolf Larsen cowers Humphrey Van Weyden with a diatribe against the weakness of society and glorifies the individual's struggle against the elements of nature, so London was expressing the political myths of twentieth century America. In identifying and evaluating such political

ideas, fiction is indispensable.

Included in this paper is an evaluation of London's socialist writing and his socialist beliefs. It has, however, been concluded that his fiction communicates the glorification of power, violence, individualism, racism, and imperialism as political principles. Basically, these concepts are abstract expressions of ideologies. In fiction, however, abstract ideology is transformed into the tangible terms of human motivations. Thus, when Martin Eden, the muscular boy who has fought his way out of ignorance and poverty, is repelled by socialism, he expresses the reaction of a representative character to an ideological system. Fiction illuminates the relationship between political ideology and human experience better than any other form of communication.

Most importantly, this paper demonstrates the use of fiction in the analysis of human motivations. Politics as the total spectrum of man's interaction in society must eventually be reduced to human behavior. This may be done by collecting myriads of data on voter participation or birth rates. But it may also be accomplished by subjectively interpreting the vast amounts of available fiction. The analysis of London's fiction revealed the autobiographical nature of his central characters--Wolf Larsen, Ernest Everhard, and Martin Eden--and the reactions to their respective environments. By isolating and evaluating the motivations of each of these characters, a number of conclusive concepts were arrived at concerning London, his fiction, and his society.

Fiction is a creative writer's reaction to life, and is

usually expressed in terms of human behavior. This behavior may be biological, psychological, or both. But when behavior is political in nature, it is of interest to political scientists. Not all fiction directly (or even indirectly) relates human behavior to social power. Not all fiction is credible. In fact, of all the fiction created during any period, only a small part may be pertinent to the discipline of political science. This paper has dealt exclusively with Jack London's fiction, but it is only an example of the available fiction which illuminates political concepts. As did London, many fiction writers have produced insights into human behavior. The relationship between political science and political fiction provides a unique challenge to the discipline of political science. When political scientists are willing to pick and choose among the available works of fiction, they will find an almost untapped reservoir of information about the social behavior of man. It is a source of information which, by all means, should be exploited in the interest of political understanding.

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JACK LONDON: AMERICAN POLITICAL PARADOX

by

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The purpose of this study is twofold. In the first place, it is intended to demonstrate the validity of fiction as an area of study within the discipline of political science. Secondly, it is an evaluation of the life and literary works of Jack London.

An evaluation of political fiction involves two major considerations. The first is a thorough examination of the writer's life, his political commitment, and his social environment. Secondly, the investigator need undertake a comprehensive analysis of one or more of the author's fictional works. The particular methodology employed in analyzing political fiction will be determined by the works involved and the objectives of the study.

Jack London provides an especially interesting subject for an investigation of political fiction. He was active in the arena of practical politics and professed a high degree of political commitment. Moreover, he produced a vast amount of fiction, all of which is heavily infused with political ideas. London preached a gospel of revolutionary socialism, but a comprehensive analysis of his fiction reveals an adherence to concepts totally alien to socialist doctrine. Thus, London and his fiction present a paradox which is highly representative of American society at the turn of the twentieth century.

This paper included a comparative study of three major novels--The Sea Wolf, The Iron Heel, and Martin Eden. London claimed that each of these works was devoted to promoting the socialist cause. The conclusions reached in this investigation indicate quite the opposite. The most constant theme in London's fiction is that of extreme individualism which is manifested in pure narcissism. His fiction glorifies the concepts of Herbert

Spencer's Social Darwinism. His major characters--most are semi-autobiographical--are New World Nietzschean supermen, infected with the zeal of imperialism and tainted by the blight of racism. They are blond, blue-eyed Nordics who storm across the face of the earth, violently and brutally subduing the inferior peoples in the name of American assertiveness.

The conclusion of this paper suggests that London's works are highly representative of the American political mind at the beginning of this century. As did London's fiction, American society gave tacit concern to social reform. Its energy and enthusiasm, however, were directed toward a new aggressiveness in world politics. In pursuit of new frontiers to conquer, the United States was a nation becoming aware of power such as the world had never before known. It seems, then, that Jack London was influenced by his environment and, in turn, he influenced his vast reading public by reinforcing its basic nationalistic preconceptions.

As a model for the study of political fiction, this paper reveals several critical factors concerning the relevance of fiction to the study of politics. It illustrates the importance of fiction as a method for communicating political ideas. It demonstrates the significance of fiction by illuminating the relationship between political ideology and human experience. Most importantly, this paper substantiates the use of fiction in the analysis of human behavior. These functions are both compatible and complimentary with the study of politics. Political fiction is an essential subject within the discipline of political science.

